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SPECIAL INTERZONE ISSUE²

FEATURING:

Ten Days That Shook the World

By Kim Newman

and Eugene Byrne

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The Infinite Assassin

By Greg Egan

One thing never changes: when some mutant junkie on S starts shuffling reality, it's always me they send into the whirlpool to put things right.

Why? They tell me I'm stable. Reliable. Dependable. After each debriefing, The Company's psychologists (complete strangers, every time) shake their heads in astonishment at their printouts, and tell me that I'm exactly the same person as when "I" went in.

The number of parallel worlds is uncountably infinite — infinite like the real numbers, not merely like the integers — making it difficult to quantify these things without elaborate mathematical definitions, but roughly speaking, it seems that I'm unusually invariant: more alike from world to world than most people are. How alike? In how many worlds? Enough to be useful. Enough to do the job.

How The Company knew this, how they found me, I've never been told. I was recruited at the age of nineteen. Bribed. Trained. Brainwashed, I suppose. Sometimes I wonder if my stability has anything to do with me; maybe the real constant is the way I've been prepared. Maybe an infinite number of different people, put through the same process, would all emerge the same. Have all emerged the same. I don't know.

Detectors scattered across the planet have sensed the faint beginnings of the whirlpool and pinned down the centre to within a few kilometres, but that's the most accurate fix I can expect by this means. Each version of The Company shares its technology freely with the others to ensure a uniformly optimal response, but even in the best of all possible worlds the detectors are too large, and too delicate, to carry in closer for a more precise reading.

A helicopter deposits me on wasteland at the southern edge of the Leighton ghetto. I've never been here before, but the boarded-up storefronts and grey tower blocks ahead are utterly familiar. Every large city in the world (in every world I know) has a place like this, created by a policy that's usually referred to as *differential enforcement*. Using or possessing S is strictly illegal, and the penalty in most countries is (mostly) summary execution, but the powers that be would rather have the users concentrated in designated areas than risk having them scattered among the community at large. So, if you're caught with S in a nice clean suburb, they'll blow a hole in your skull on the spot, but here, there's no chance of that. Here, there are no cops at all.

I head north. It's just after four a.m., but savagely hot, and, once I move out of the buffer zone, the streets are crowded. People are coming and going from nightclubs, liquor stores, pawn shops, gambling houses, brothels. Power for street lighting has been cut off from this part of the city, but someone civic-minded has replaced the normal bulbs with self-contained tritium/phosphor globes, spilling a cool pale light like radioactive milk. There's a popular misconception that most S users do nothing but dream, twenty-four hours a day, but that's ludicrous; not only do they need to eat, drink and earn money like everyone else, but few would waste the drug on the time when their alter egos are themselves asleep.

Intelligence says there's some kind of whirlpool cult in Leighton who may try to interfere with my work. I've been warned of such groups before, but it's never come to anything; the slightest shift in reality is usually all it takes to make such an aberration vanish. The Company, the ghettos, are the stable responses to S; everything else seems to be highly conditional. Still, I shouldn't be complacent. Even if these cults can have no significant impact on the mission as a whole, no doubt they have killed some versions of me in the past, and

I don't want it to be my turn this time. I know that an infinite number of versions of me would survive — some whose only difference from me would be that they had survived — so perhaps I ought to be entirely untroubled by the thought of death.

But I'm not.

Wardrobe have dressed me with scrupulous care, in a Fat Single Mothers Must Die World Tour souvenir reflection hologram T-shirt, the right style of jeans, the right model running shoes. Paradoxically, S users tend to be slavish adherents to "local" fashion, as opposed to that of their dreams; perhaps it's a matter of wanting to partition their sleeping and waking lives. For now, I'm in perfect camouflage, but I don't expect that to last; as the whirlpool picks up speed, sweeping different parts of the ghetto into different histories, changes in style will be one of the most sensitive markers. If my clothes don't look out of place before too long, I'll know I'm headed in the wrong direction.

A tall, bald man with a shrunken human thumb dangling from one earlobe collides with me as he runs out of a bar. As we separate, he turns on me, screaming taunts and obscenities. I respond cautiously; he may have friends in the crowd, and I don't have time to waste getting into that kind of trouble. I don't escalate things by replying, but I take care to appear confident, without seeming arrogant or disdainful. This balancing act pays off. Insulting me with impunity for thirty seconds apparently satisfies his pride, and he walks away smirking.

As I move on, though, I can't help wondering how many versions of me didn't get out of it so easily.

I pick up speed to compensate for the delay.

Someone catches up with me and starts walking beside me. "Hey, I liked the way you handled that. Subtle. Manipulative. Pragmatic. Full marks." A woman in her late twenties, with short, metallic-blue hair.

"Fuck off. I'm not interested."

"In what?"

"In anything."

She shakes her head. "Not true. You're new around here, and you're looking for something. Or someone. Maybe I can help."

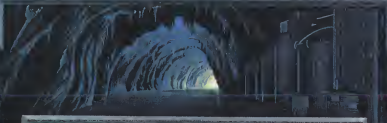
"I said, fuck off."

She shrugs and falls behind, but calls after me, "Every hunter needs a guide. Think about it."

A few blocks later, I turn into an unlit side street. Deserted, silent; stinking of half-burnt garbage, cheap insecticide, and piss. And I swear I can feel it: in the dark, ruined buildings all around me, people are dreaming on S.

S is not like any other drug. S dreams are neither surreal nor euphoric. Nor are they like simulator trips: empty fantasies, absurd fairy tales of limitless prosperity and indescribable bliss. They're dreams of lives that, literally, *might have been lived* by the dreamers, every bit as solid and plausible as their waking lives.

With one exception: if the dream-life turns sour, the dreamer can abandon it at will and choose another (without any need to dream of taking S ... although that's been known to happen). He or she can piece together a second life, in which no mistakes are irrevocable, no decisions absolute. A life without failures, without dead ends. All possibilities remain forever accessible.



S grants dreamers the power to live vicariously in any parallel world in which they have an alter ego — someone with whom they share enough brain physiology to maintain the parasitic resonance of the link. Studies suggest that a perfect genetic match isn't necessary for this — but neither is it sufficient; early-childhood development also seems to affect the neural structures involved.

For most users, the drug does no more than this. For one in a hundred thousand, though, dreams are only the beginning. During their third or fourth year on S, they start to move physically from world to world, as they strive to take the place of their chosen alter egos.

The trouble is, there's never anything so simple as an infinity of direct exchanges, between all the versions of the mutant user who've gained this power, and all the versions they wish to become. Such transitions are energetically unfavourable; in practice, each dreamer must move gradually, continuously, passing through all the intervening points. But those "points" are occupied by other versions of themselves; it's like motion in a crowd — or a fluid. The dreamers must flow.

At first, those alter egos who've developed the skill are distributed too sparsely to have any effect at all. Later, it seems there's a kind of paralysis through symmetry; all potential flows are equally possible, including each one's exact opposite. Everything just cancels out.

The first few times the symmetry is broken, there's usually nothing but a brief shudder, a momentary slippage, an almost imperceptible world-quake. The detectors record these events, but are still too insensitive to localize them.

Eventually, some kind of critical threshold is crossed. Complex, sustained flows develop: vast, tangled currents with the kind of pathological topologies that only an infinite-dimensional space can contain. Such flows are viscous; nearby points are dragged along. That's what creates the whirlpool; the closer you are to the mutant dreamer, the faster you're carried from world to world.

As more and more versions of the dreamer contribute to the flow, it picks up speed — and the faster it becomes, the further away its influence is felt.

The Company, of course, doesn't give a shit if reality is scrambled in the ghettos. My job is to keep the effects from spreading beyond.

I follow the side street to the top of a hill. There's another main road about four hundred metres ahead. I find a sheltered spot amid the rubble of a half-demolished building, unfold a pair of binoculars, and spend five minutes watching the pedestrians below. Every ten or fifteen seconds, I notice a tiny mutation: an item of clothing changing; a person suddenly shifting position, or vanishing completely, or materializing from nowhere. The binoculars are smart; they count up the number of events which take place in their field of view, as well as compute the map coordinates of the point they're aimed at.

I turn one hundred and eighty degrees and look back on the crowd that I passed through on my way here. The rate is substantially lower, but the same kind of thing is visible. Bystanders, of course, notice nothing; as yet, the whirlpool's gradients are so shallow that any two people within sight of each other on a crowded street would more or less shift universes together. Only at a distance can the changes be seen.

In fact, since I'm closer to the centre of the whirlpool than the people to the south of me, most of the changes I see in that direction are due to my own rate of shift. I've long ago left the world of my most recent employers behind — but I have no doubt that the vacancy has been, and will continue to be, filled.

I'm going to have to make a third observation to get a fix, some distance away from the north-south line joining the first two points. Over time, of course, the centre will drift, but not very rapidly; the flow runs between worlds where the centres

are close together, so its position is the last thing to change. I head down the hill, westwards.

Among crowds and lights again, waiting for a gap in the traffic, someone taps my elbow. I turn, to see the same blue-haired woman who accosted me before. I give her a stare of mild annoyance, but I keep my mouth shut; I don't know whether or not this version of her has met a version of me, and I don't want to contradict her expectations. By now, at least some of the locals must have noticed what's going on — just listening to an outside radio station, stuttering randomly from song to song, should be enough to give it a way — but it's not in my interest to spread the news.

She says, "I can help you find her."

"Help me find who?"

"I know exactly where she is. There's no need to waste time on measurements and calc —"

"Shut up. Come with me."

She follows me, uncomplaining, into a nearby alley. *Maybe I'm being set up for an ambush. By the whirlpool cult?* But the alley is deserted. When I'm sure we're alone, I push her against the wall and put a gun to her head. She doesn't call out or resist; she's shaken, but I don't think she's surprised by this treatment. I scan her with a hand-held magnetic-resonance imager; no weapons, no booby traps, no transmitters.

I say, "Why don't you tell me what this is all about?" I'd swear that nobody could have seen me on the hill, but maybe she saw another version of me. It's not like me to screw up, but it does happen.

She closes her eyes for a moment, then says, almost calmly, "I want to save you time, that's all. I know where the mutant is. I want to help you find her as quickly as possible."

"Why?"

"Why? I have a business here, and I don't want to see it disrupted. Do you know how hard it is to build up contacts again after a whirlpool's been through? What do you think — I'm covered by insurance?"

I don't believe a word of this, but I see no reason not to play along; it's probably the simplest way to deal with her, short of blowing her brains out. I put away the gun and take a map from my pocket. "Show me."

She points out a building about two kilometres northeast of where we are. "Fifth floor. Apartment 522."

"How do you know?"

"A friend of mine lives in the building. He noticed the effects just before midnight, and he got in touch with me." She laughs nervously. "Actually, I don't know the guy at all that well... but I think the version who phoned me had something going on with another me."

"Why didn't you just leave when you heard the news? Clear out to a safe distance?"

She shakes her head vehemently. "Leaving is the worst thing to do; I'd end up even more out of touch. The outside world doesn't matter. Do you think I care if the government changes, or the pop stars have different names? This is my home. If Leighton shifts, I'm better off shifting with it. Or with part of it."

"So how did you find me?"

She shrugs. "I knew you'd be coming. Everybody knows that much. Of course, I didn't know what you'd look like — but I know this place pretty well, and I kept my eyes open for strangers. And it seems I got lucky."

Lucky. Exactly. Some of my alter egos will be having versions of this conversation, but others won't be having any conversation at all. One more random delay.

I fold the map. "Thanks for the information."

She nods. "Any time."

As I'm walking away, she calls out, "Every time."

I quicken my step for a while; other versions of me should be doing the same, compensating for however much

time they've wasted. I can't expect to maintain perfect synchrony, but dispersion is insidious; if I didn't at least try to minimize it, I'd end up travelling to the centre by every conceivable route, and arriving over a period of days.

And although I can usually make up lost time, I can never entirely cancel out the effects of variable delays. Spending different amounts of time at different distances from the centre means that all the versions of me aren't shifted uniformly. There are theoretical models which show that under certain conditions, this could result in gaps; I could be squeezed into certain portions of the flow, and removed from others — a bit like halving all the numbers between 0 and 1, leaving a hole from 0.5 to 1 ... squashing one infinity into another which is cardinally identical, but half the geometric size. No versions of me would have been destroyed, and I wouldn't even exist twice in the same world, but, nevertheless, a gap would have been created.

As for heading straight for the building where my "informant" claims the mutant is dreaming, I'm not tempted at all. Whether or not the information is genuine, I doubt very much that I've received the tip-off in any but an insignificant portion — technically, a set of measure zero — of the worlds caught up in the whirlpool. Any action taken only in such a sparse set of worlds would be totally ineffectual, in terms of disrupting the flow.

If I'm right, then of course it makes no difference *what* I do; if all the versions of me who received the tip-off simply marched out of the whirlpool, it would have no impact on the mission. A set of measure zero wouldn't be missed. But my actions as an individual are *always* irrelevant in that sense; if I, and I alone, deserted, the loss would be infinitesimal. The catch is, I could never know that I was acting alone.

And the truth is, versions of me probably have deserted; however stable my personality, it's hard to believe that there are no valid quantum permutations entailing such an action. Whatever the physically possible choices are, my alter egos have made — and will continue to make — every single one of them. My stability lies in the distribution, and the relative density, of all these branches — in the shape of a static, pre-ordered structure. Free will is a rationalization; I can't help making all the right decisions. And all the wrong ones.

But I "prefer" (granting meaning to the word) not to think this way too often. The only sane approach is to think of myself as one free agent of many, and to "strive" for coherence; to ignore short cuts, to stick to procedure, to "do everything I can" to concentrate my presence.

As for worrying about those alter egos who desert, or fail, or die, there's a simple solution: I disown them. It's up to me to define my identity any way I like. I may be forced to accept my multiplicity, but the borders are mine to draw. "I" am those who survive, and succeed. The rest are someone else.

I reach a suitable vantage point and take a third count. The view is starting to look like a half-hour video recording edited down to five minutes — except that the whole scene doesn't change at once; apart from some highly correlated couples, different people vanish and appear independently, suffering their own individual jump cuts. They're still all shifting universes more or less together, but what that means, in terms of where they happen to be physically located at any instant, is so complex that it might as well be random. A few people don't vanish at all; one man loiters consistently on the same street corner — although his haircut changes, radically, at least five times.

When the measurement is over, the computer inside the binoculars flashes up coordinates for the centre's estimated position. It's about sixty metres from the building the blue-haired woman pointed out; well within the margin of error. So perhaps she was telling the truth — but that changes nothing. I must still ignore her.

As I start towards my target, I wonder: maybe I was ambushed back in that alley, after all. Maybe I was given the mutant's location as a deliberate attempt to distract me, to

divide me. Maybe the woman tossed a coin to split the universe: heads for a tip-off, tails for none — or threw dice, and chose from a wider list of strategies.

It's only a theory ... but it's a comforting idea: if that's the best the whirlpool cult can do to protect the object of their devotion, then I have nothing to fear from them at all.

I avoid the major roads, but even on the side streets it's soon clear that the world is out. People run past me, some hysterical, some grim; some empty-handed, some toting possessions; one man dashes from door to door, hurling bricks through windows, waking the occupants, shouting the news. Not everyone's heading in the same direction; most are simply fleeing the ghetto, trying to escape the whirlpool, but others are no doubt frantically searching for their friends, their families, their lovers, in the hope of reaching them before they turn into strangers. I wish them well.

Except in the central disaster zone, a few hardcore dreamers will stay put. Shifting doesn't matter to them; they can reach their dream-lives from anywhere — or so they think. Some may be in for a shock; the whirlpool can pass through worlds where there is no supply of S — where the mutant user has an alter ego who has never even heard of the drug.

As I turn into a long, straight avenue, the naked-eye view begins to take on the jump-cut appearance that binoculars produced just fifteen minutes ago. People flicker, shift, vanish. Nobody stays in sight for long; few travel more than ten or twenty metres before disappearing. Many are flinching and stumbling as they run, baulking at empty space as often as at real obstacles, all confidence in the permanence of the world around them rightly shattered. Some run blindly with their heads down and their arms outstretched. Most people are smart enough to travel on foot, but plenty of smashed and abandoned cars strobe in and out of existence on the roadway. I witness one car in motion, but only fleetingly.

I don't see myself anywhere about; I never have yet. Random scatter *should* put me in the same world twice, in some worlds — but only in a set of measure zero. Throw two idealized darts at a dartboard, and the probability of hitting the same point — the same zero-dimensional point — twice, is zero. Repeat the experiment in an uncountably infinite number of worlds, and it will happen — but only in a set of measure zero.

The changes are most frantic in the distance, and the blur of activity retreats to some extent as I move — due as it is, in part, to mere separation — but I'm also heading into steeper gradients, so I am, slowly, gaining on the havoc. I keep to a measured pace, looking out for both sudden human obstacles and shifts in the terrain.

The pedestrians thin out. The street itself endures, but the buildings around me are beginning to be transformed into bizarre chimeras, with mismatched segments from variant designs, and then, from utterly different structures, appearing side by side. It's like walking through some holographic architectural identikit machine on overdrive. Before long, most of these composites are collapsing, unbalanced by fatal disagreements on where loads should be borne. Falling rubble makes the footpath dangerous, so I weave my way between the car bodies in the middle of the road. There's virtually no moving traffic now, but it's slow work just navigating between all this "stationary" scrap metal. Obstructions come and go; it's usually quicker to wait for them to vanish than to back-track and look for another way through. Sometimes I'm hemmed in on all sides, but never for long.

Finally, most of the buildings around me seem to have toppled, in most worlds, and I find a path near the edge of the road that's relatively passable. Nearby, it looks as though an earthquake has levelled the ghetto. Looking back, away from

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The Nilakantha Scream

By Eric Brown

Sabine is in Rio, checking out the stalls in the cryogen-mart for a retinal graft, when her hand tingles with an incoming call. Østergaard smiles up from her miniature metacarpal screen.

"What do you want?" Sabine says, surprised.

"I want to see you," her boss says. "The Historical Participatorium, Lisbon. Six hours." He smiles again and is gone.

This is the first time in years that Ø has contacted her himself, and the summons worries her. How often has she told him that she cannot return his love? Like everyone with riches and power, Ø assumes he can buy his every desire: he'd fallen in love with Sabine when he'd read her head ten years ago, had plucked her from the Antananarivo slum of her childhood and employed her in his agency. Years later, when she had grown and matured, he approached her with offers of marriage and fabulous wealth, but by then it was too late. So why the summons now? Hell, he had tele-ability — he could probe her and read how ineradicable was her love for Laxmi, how inconsolable her grief.

She rides the slide away from the chemical reek of frozen flesh that lingers over the 'mart, and heads towards the sub-orb station beneath the effigy of Christ. At this time of day the scream that haunts the world is not so pronounced; it's at the beginning of its cycle, a subliminal howl that Sabine can tolerate. Later, the scream will increase and play havoc with telepathic awareness around the world. And for Sabine it will be especially painful.

She takes her seat aboard the sub-orb shuttle, just another Europebound cosmopolite. Her face is a mix of Negroid, Oriental and Scandinavian characteristics: skin the colour of mocha, severe slant eyes and golden dreadlocks swept back in a fiery comet's tail.

Five hours later she's in Lisbon and the brainscream, a crescendo of almost physical agony, makes the thought of oblivion an attractive option.

Sabine Savstageot met Laxmi Begum in the capital of the United States of India.

Five years ago Sabine took a holiday in Varanasi. The city was everything she had expected it to be — dirty, noisy and overcrowded. To escape the chaos she spent many a warm evening wandering through the narrow alleys on the banks of the Ganges. After watching the cremations on the ghats she'd return slowly to her hotel, the scent of woodsmoke and cooking flesh leaving a bitter taste in her mouth.

She found Laxmi between a rickety stack of campa-cola crates and the micro-laser stand of a gem-cutter. She'd been reading occasionally on the way back from the river, browsing in the alien territory of the Hindu mind. And she'd been aware of Laxmi's emanations long before she actually saw the girl. At first she assumed that the discordant mindwash was the product of some pained animal, a rabid dog or crippled temple monkey. Then she turned a corner and the truth blitzed her.

Until then Sabine had dismissed claims of "love at first sight" as the retroactive illusion of incurable romantics — something that she, who could always read the truth behind superficial beauty, had never been prey to. Nevertheless she experienced it now, chaotically and irrationally — for Laxmi was a limbleless torso slung recumbent on the woven twine of a hand-made charpoy. The stump of her naked body was patched with pressure sores and cross-hatched with bloody weals in the pattern of the lattices.

Sabine stared at her and failed to see the diseased, Kohl-rimmed eyes that gazed out blindly, or the greasy lice-infested hair. She probed deeper, and found the girl's mind to

be as crippled and malformed as her body. Sabine saw only the beauty of the girl's martyred face, though — and that which she might become.

The gem-cutter, squatting over his work, noticed her appalled fascination and proffered a palm for baksheesh. Sabine fled.

The following day she made enquiries.

Laxmi was fourteen, and an orphan. Her parents had perished in the monsoon floods of '17 and she had been taken in by her uncle, the gem-cutter, and his wife. Born without limbs, she was blind, meningitis and brain-damaged. And harijan too, as if her physical afflictions were not enough. Sabine hired a medic who told her that the girl would be dead within six months — which would be fine by the gem-cutter. As far as he was concerned, Laxmi had earned her present terrible condition through ill deeds committed in a previous life. Death would be a release, an opportunity to improve her karmic standing.

And Sabine might have agreed that death would be a merciful release, had she not been aware of the wonders of Western medical technology.

One week after finding Laxmi, Sabine bought her for ten thousand credits.

She had the girl dispatched to Rio and installed in an expensive total-resurrection clinic. To pay for Laxmi's rebirth she probed minds overtime. She chose to stay away from Rio, retaining the mental picture of Laxmi on the charpoy to match against what she thought of as the finished product. The medics supplied her with progress reports from month to month. They chose to work first on the girl's physical disabilities, and flushed from her system the meningitis virus and others lurking there. They straightened her spine, adding vertebrae, and remodelled her deformed pelvic flanges to accommodate the vat-nurtured hips and legs grafted on six months into the operation. They gave her slim arms and big brown eyes, and then began work on her mind. They boosted her IQ with synthetic cortical implants and a small occipital computer, with input sockets jacked direct to the learning centres of her brain to facilitate the crash course of lessons programmed over the next year. The medics suggested a childhood-analogue implant, but on Sabine's instructions she was told the truth of her origins. At the time, the thought of Laxmi living a lie with no knowledge of the truth filled Sabine with horror. Only later did she wonder how much this was because she wanted the girl to know that it was she who had saved her life ...

Two years after the first operation, Laxmi walked from the clinic. She had Sabine's tag and stack location, but instead of getting in touch she returned to India. After a year's training she joined the United Indian spacefleet. Her first bigship was the *Pride of Udaipur*, an exploration vessel bound for the Crab Nebula, six thousand light years from Earth.

Laxmi was seventeen. And the first harijan in space.

Sabine has an hour to kill before her rendezvous with Østergaard. She chooses an outdoor café on the paved *Praca do Comercio*, sips liquor and fixes her attention on the wide, blue River Tagus. She orders a second drink, then a third. This has nothing to do with her apprehension at the meeting with Ø, dread it though she does.

The brainwash is more of a screech now, a cerebral assault of white noise. Sabine can hardly close her eyes, cut her drinks help. From time to time she finds herself trying to single out



the chord of Laxmi's agony from the whole — but she knows that this is impossible. The existential scream emanates from the eleven Indian crew members as well as from Laxmi — a concerted cry of torture beyond individual identification.

As always, as if to illustrate Sabine's painful isolation, the people around her are happily unaware: tourists stroll casually; a party of schoolchildren runs through the streets; the waiter serves her and smiles without a care. Everything is normal, running smooth. Only grade-one telepaths are cursed with the interstellar cry.

Towards the end of the hour, as she gets up and leaves the café, the pain begins to diminish; she is aware of a certain diminuendo as the daily emission reaches the low point of its cycle. She strolls across the square and into the quartz dodecahedron of the Historical Participatorium.

Oddly, for a weekday, it is closed. However, a slim young man attracts her attention in the foyer and escorts her into a downchute. They pass through a pair of swing doors into the darkened auditorium. Sabine takes a few steps forward, then looks round to find the boy gone. She walks through the darkness between rows of seats. "Østergaart?"

And instantly a vertical column of light illuminates the circular stage in the well of the amphitheatre. On the stage, arranged in the frozen postures they arrived at when the last performance closed, are a dozen figures in orange robes, with Buddha in the lotus position beneath a Bo tree.

Østergaart, immaculate in a jet-black one-piece suit, makes his entrance from stage left. He is tall and tanned and impossibly handsome — and the fact that he has changed not at all in five years is testimony to the artificiality of his appearance.

Sabine finds this another excuse to dislike the man. Although she makes use of all the latest medical advances, as an aid to her profession, she has done nothing to remove the slight lines and wrinkles that age and experience have etched on her face. Østergaart's perfection is the symptom of a vanity that Sabine considers tantamount to a character defect.

She is glad she is startled now, so that Ø cannot read her thoughts. Then again, if he could probe her he might realize how much she dislikes him, leave her alone for good...

Østergaart assumes a foursquare pose centre-stage and smiles down at her. "It's been a long time, Sabine. When did we last meet...?" He feigns intense recollection. "Paris, '27? You recall, we dined at the Eiffel gastrodome —"

She stares at him, defiant. "What do you want?" Ø's look suddenly hardens. "Not what you think, Miss Savatgesq. This is purely business — please, sit down." He indicates a seat in the front row of the auditorium.

Sabine obeys, her relief tempered by suspicion at why he needs to see her in person. She does not trust Ø. A man with his power does not so easily cease chasing that which he has desired for years.

"The reason I called you here...," Ø says. "I regard you as the finest telepath I have, Sabine..."

She remains silent, staring at him.

"You deserve promotion."

As Sabine is already grade-one, and in the highest pay bracket for teleheads, she wonders just what "promotion" might mean. "Partnership in the company?" she suggests, sarcastic.

"I mean a promotion of ability — of telepower. I want to make your ability more powerful than it is already..." And lets it hang.

It takes seconds for Sabine to see the implications. "More powerful?" she laughs. "Listen, I can hardly take the scream now. Just how the hell do you think I'd survive with it amplified?" And she trembles with rage as if, by what he's suggesting, Østergaart is somehow trying to devalue the pain of her loss.

"Let me explain, Sabine... You'd undergo an operation to fit an occipital computer and an implant in your cerebellum. Strictly speaking, you would then cease to be a telepath. You

would have the ability to deal with genetics."

"Racial memories?"

"Not quite," Ø says. "Please put on the headphones."

Each seat is equipped with a pair of phones, and Sabine clamps the padded ear-muffs around her head. Østergaart leaves the stage and seconds later the scene comes to life. The robot beneath the tree begins to move and speak — and it's as if Sabine is inside Siddhartha Gautama's cranium, participating in this historical recreation. With a little concentration she can almost forget that she is herself. The effect is similar to that of total immersion in the psyche of one of her subjects — with the difference that whereas her subjects are invariably bad, Buddha is good.

"Okay," Østergaart says. On stage the robot winds down, is left frozen midway through a beatific gesture. Sabine feels a swift sense of regret as the good brainwaves subside. Ø emerges from the wings and gestures for her to come up on stage.

They cross to the seated robot that plays the part of Buddha. Østergaart reaches out and folds back the ear. "Look," he says. And Sabine sees the legend ØSTERGAART INDUSTRIES printed small around the inside.

"All this belongs to you?"

"I initiated the Historical Participatoriums a year ago."

"How does this fit in with genetics —?"

"Years ago, before I started the Agency, I was involved in experimental psionic research at the Oslo Institute. I had a gene-telepath probe the area of the brain so far unused, that vast untapped reservoir of potential, and found the stacked genetic material of ancestors going back to the very start of time. Last year I located the descendants of famous people, from Jesus to Hitler, Buddha to Genghis Khan. For limited periods my telepath could bring forth certain individuals to inhabit present-day bodies. She could not maintain the connection indefinitely, but for just long enough to record thought-process analogues — which is what you experienced just now. We have done it with a few hundred subjects so far, some more successfully than others."

"If your genetic telepath can do this," Sabine says, "I don't see why you need me..."

"Natalia was murdered one month ago," Ø replies. "You are her replacement. My surgeons will fit you with a small implant, and after the operation you will be able to summon ancestors to inhabit the bodies of their descendants on... shall we say, a 'time-share' basis."

Sabine does not say so, but to her this facility seems more like a demotion: from apprehending criminals to recreating historical personalities for the entertainment industry.

She gestures to the stage and the static players. "I presume the ability will be used to greater effect than just..."

Ø smiles to himself. "Look," he says, and indicates the backcloth. As Sabine watches, a hologram appears. The portrait is that of a Chinese bishop captain, upstanding and proud in the uniform of the People's Spacefleet.

"Xian Cheng," Ø says. "The former captain of the *Lao Tzu*. He and his crew were the first Earthmen to explore the Nilakantha Stardrift, and specifically the Earthlike planet of star Kalki."

Sabine feels suddenly faint. "I don't see..."

"Cheng was in command of a landing party that explored Kalki II. He was the only member of that party to make it back to the ship — six others perished in mysterious circumstances. Cheng never fully recovered from the ordeal; whatever fate befell the scientists also, to a lesser degree, affected him. He could not explain what had happened on the planet, and this was before the time of telepaths. He was discharged from the service and the Nilakantha Stardrift was declared off-limits. Until a year ago, that is."

Sabine nods, wordless. Østergaart continues, "Cheng went into retreat and entered a Buddhist monastery in the state of Tibet. He died a few years later without ever fully recounting what happened on that landfall. Then, one month ago, I



learned that on his return from the 'drift he had fathered a daughter ..."

Sabine begins to see a pattern to the events of the past hour. Before she can speak, Ø goes on, "The scream is wreaking havoc with all grade-ones, Sabine. The underworld doesn't know exactly what's happening, but they're suddenly finding their crimes going unsolved. This cannot continue. I need an answer ..." He stares directly at Sabine, waiting.

She whispers, "His daughter ...?"

Ø smiles, nodding. "You will probe his daughter, access Captain Xian Cheng and bring him forth. We will then be able to find out exactly what happened on Kalki II, perhaps even learn enough to help us combat the scream."

Sabine feels light-headed. "But if I undergo this operation, won't the scream—"

Østergaart shakes his head in an emphatic negative. "You will be able to control your ability by the simple expedient of switching off the occipital computer. For you, the scream will no longer exist."

The thought that at last she might find out what terrible fate befell her lover fills her with a mixture of relief and dread. She tries to imagine what it will be like without the only thing that connects her to Laxmi — and some sense of martyrdom makes her wonder if she'll miss the delicious pain of self-pity.

Then her suspicion of Østergaart returns. Does he have an ulterior motive for offering her this release? Does he think that her love for Laxmi might be diminished when she is no longer torn by the primal scream?

At that second, the scream makes itself known again in the back of her mind; it begins its return on an upward cycle.

"When can I have the operation?" Sabine asks.

"How about tonight? I have my surgeons ready and waiting in Montreal ..."

Sabine inclines her head in assent. She tells herself that only when she finds out what happened, all those light-years away, will she be able to help Laxmi.

Sabine and Ø leave the auditorium together.

Sabine was living in Switzerland a year back when Laxmi returned from the Out-there on her first tour of duty. Between shifts she partied with film stars and Euro-politicians and tried to forget that the *Pride of Udaipur* was docked in Bombay. Often she'd try to analyse her motives in saving the Indian girl, and at the conclusion of the process she had to admit that it was in part prompted by some deep, maternal instinct. In Sabine's idealized scenario of the future, Laxmi would fill the role of lover and daughter, and as the time passed and Laxmi failed to contact her it hurt Sabine that she was neither.

Then, one morning, as she breakfasted on the patio overlooking Lake Geneva, she had a visitor. She saw the small figure climbing the switch-back steps that serviced the apartment, but assumed it was the owner of a residence higher up the hill. Only as the woman approached the patio, and Sabine saw that she was Asian, did the realisation hit her.

She paused by the rail, shielding her eyes from the sun and smiling at Sabine. Her silvers were cut off above knee and elbow, and on the swell of her chest was the multi-armed Shiva logo of the United Indian Spacefleet.

Sabine thought back to the pitiful torso of four years ago, and it was hard to credit that this pretty eighteen-year-old was the same person. "Laxmi ... it is you, isn't it?"

The woman's smile widened, glacial enamel against brown skin. Her eyes were alight. Sabine stood, tipping her chair, and they embraced. Then she pulled away and laughed, tearful. "This is ridiculous! I hardly know you ..." She probed, experienced the woman's warmth, her affection, and then out of propriety withdrew and allowed Laxmi to speak her mind herself.

They spent the following six months together. Laxmi had a furlough day, and Sabine was granted long-service leave from the Østergaart Agency. They rented a villa in the coastal

resort of Manakara, Madagascar, and divided their time between exploring each other and the island.

Sabine loved the spacer for what she had become, a gifted and genuine person in her own right, above and beyond the intellectual advantage bestowed by the cortical implants: technology could grant intellect, but only experience and reflection brought wisdom. Often Sabine would read the Indian woman, and in Laxmi's mind she saw herself as the mother Laxmi had never known, a focus of maternal permanence in a chaotic continuum, a companion, friend and lover.

Then, towards the end of the six months, a summons arrived for Laxmi from the United Indian Spacefleet.

They spent the last night together on the balcony of their villa and watched the sun sink into the Indian Ocean. "Where?" Sabine asked, indicating the massed stars.

"I'm supposed to tell no one," Laxmi whispered, and pointed. "See that veil? There. The Nilakantha Stardrift ..."

Sabine drew away from the Indian to look at her. The name was familiar. "Isn't that ...?"

Laxmi nodded. "It was off-limits until just recently. We're going in there to take another look."

"You take care, okay?" She kissed Laxmi and tried to forget that she was leaving in the morning.

Six months later Sabine caught a newscast which reported that the crew of the *Pride of Udaipur* had perished in the 'drift. A later report corrected this. The crew had suffered serious injuries on the planet of Kalki II, and the android back-up team had rescued them and was piloting the bigship back to Earth.

And around that time the scream began.

Twelve hours after the operation Sabine takes the sub-orb from Montreal and rendezvous with Østergaart in Rome. She is aware of a slight discomfort at the base of her skull, where the teflon bulge of the occipital computer obtrudes through her skin, and from time to time she suffers acute, stabbing migraines. But this is a small price to pay for the banishment of the scream. For the first time in months she can relax without the constant, piercing presence of the nightmare in her head.

At Rome, the cortical implant bleeds instructions into her consciousness. She locates Østergaart in the arrivals lounge and he leads her from the terminal to a waiting ground-effect vehicle. A chauffeur steers them from the parking stand and into the hills.

Østergaart remains silent for a while, then glances across at her. "The implant becomes you," he murmurs, referring to the ring of black metal that encircles her neck like a choker.

Sabine ignores him, leans back and stares into the night sky. She finds the blue-shift haze of the Nilakantha Stardrift, a shimmering veil a degree above the horizon. Somewhere out there, she knows, the *Pride of Udaipur* is lighting back through the nada-continuum to Earth. Without the cerebral verification of the scream she finds it almost impossible to believe.

Østergaart clears his throat, then says casually, "While you were under ... there was a report on the crew of the *Udaipur*."

Sabine stares at him, suddenly aware of her heartbeat.

"The first officer died on Kalki II. The Andys found the rest of the crew in the jungle and managed to get them back to the ship. They're in suspension now —"

"But the scream ...?" Sabine is almost pleading. "What happened to them?" Though when she says "them" she is thinking only of Laxmi.

Ø looks away. He seems reluctant to divulge this information. "According to reports received, the landing party was attacked by the natives of the planet. Only the intervention of the Andys saved further casualties ..."

"Attacked ...?" Sabine is incredulous.

"Perhaps we'll find out more when you probe Xian Cheng."

In less than an hour they arrive at their destination.

The hotel is a towering needle supported by three scimitar-shaped legs. Between the flaring stand, and beneath the obelisk of the hotel itself, a vast glass bauble rotates slowly. Inside, a party is in progress. The sight of air-taxi landing, and affluent guests stepping out, triggers an information release in Sabine's implant. The party is in celebration of the successful Procyon probe, and the guests are the crew of the *Leonardo da Vinci* and the groundstaff at Rome spaceport. Østergaard has managed to obtain tickets, and they pass inside.

Sabine and Ø separate and circulate. This is the first time since the operation that Sabine is aware she is no longer telepathic. Her ability is switched off, and the party seems dead to her. Usually, she would be picking up a thousand different emotions from the party-goers, and responding to them on an individual basis. For a while she worries that her lack of ability might mean she will be spotted for the outsider that she is—but Ø has taken this into account. When Sabine finds herself among a group of Italian spacers recalling the spiraldown to the surface of Procyon IV, she learns that she has been programmed with all the technical information about the probe. She joins in like one of the team. And in Italian, too.

Besides which, thanks to her occipital, she resembles a spacer: most of the guests are computer-assisted, and sport a variety of implants from small occipital gadgets like Sabine's to larger, cumbersome extra-cranial units for achieving interface-integration with shipboard matrices.

Across the room, on the dance floor, Sabine sees Østergaard dancing with a young Chinese woman in the uniform of the Italian Spacefleet: Xian Cheng's daughter, Lin.

Later, as instructed, Sabine leaves the party and takes the upchute to a suite on the top floor. The door opens to her palm print. She locates the bedroom and steps out onto the balcony, drawing the shimmer-stream curtain behind her. She reclines on the lounge, stares into the night sky and locates again the scintillating beauty of the Nilakantha Starfield.

As she awaits the arrival of Ø and Lin Cheng, she considers what little is known about the first Terran expedition to the 'drift. Since Captain Xian Cheng was the sole survivor from the exploration party, and he was in no condition to submit a coherent report, the only record of what happened on Kalki II was that of the ship's first officer.

Kalki II is the dying world of a dying sun, a jungle-and-ocean planet inhabited by a species of small humanoid aliens. They are arboreal creatures, similar to the Terran ape, and inhabit the jungles of the planet's largest continent. This much was discovered by unmanned probes two years before the arrival of the *Lao Tzu*.

Three days after touchdown, Cheng took a landing party into the jungle. They set up camp and attempted to establish contact with the aliens. The following day Cheng returned to the ship to file a report to Earth. There was no hint in his dispatch of the tragedy about to befall the exploration party. Everything was running smoothly—a model planetfall, he called it.

On Cheng's return to the campsite, he contacted his first officer aboard the ship and reported that the rest of his team were missing. He intended to search the surrounding jungle for them, and requested assistance. One hour later the first officer and an engineer found Cheng in the jungle in a state approaching terror; they found also the bodies of the exploration party. Autopsies performed on-ship revealed that they had died of heart failure consistent with having undergone extreme shock. The *Lao Tzu* lighted from Kalki II the following day.

All this happened before the age of surgically induced telepathy; there was no way of learning from Cheng what had occurred to him between the time of his last radio report and when the first officer found him. Whatever killed his men had inflicted the captain with amnesia, and the events of the

landfall remained a mystery.

Sabine stares at the lights of the city spread out below. She is tortured by the memory of the scream, now no more than an echo in her head. The events of that first mission have repeated themselves to a lesser—though in a way more horrific—extent thirty years later. Laxmi and eleven of her crewmates have survived, though exactly what they have survived is a secret known only to themselves and Captain Xian Cheng.

Sabine regards the task ahead of her with ambivalence.

She hears a noise from within the bedroom. Ø calls her name and Sabine steps from the balcony. The small Chinese girl is arranging herself demurely on the bed, smiling up at Østergaard. Sabine wonders how much Ø paid the girl to undergo the process.

As the High Priestess of this unique ceremony, Sabine kneels beside the circular bed and takes Lin Cheng's brow between her fingers, as instructed by another information-release from her implant. Sabine hesitates, and then speaks the command, a techno-mantra that activates the mechanism buried within her head. She dives into the ocean of Lin Cheng's consciousness, and the computer takes over and utilizes Sabine's ability to its own ends. For her convenience, the program fits her into a structured-reality analogue: she is aware that what she is experiencing is just the symbolic representation of what is in fact a techno-chemical process. She finds herself on the lower "rung" of a spiral ladder that extends above her into infinity. As she moves up and around the helix she is conscious of human forms, suspended in placenta-like sacs to her right and left: on one side she senses masculinity, on the other femininity. Sabine is drawn to the right, towards the essence of someone she recognizes as Captain Xian Cheng. She enters his sphere and draws him out, as instructed. She slides with him down around the helter-skelter of the helix and then, with a jolt that tells her she has arrived, she finds herself once again in the room and kneeling by the bed. She is covered in sweat and shaking from the exertion of bringing Xian Cheng back to life. Østergaard, she realizes with shock, is holding her. She pulls herself away.

The figure on the bed has undergone a subtle facial transformation: with the accession of Xian Cheng to the body, the muscles of the girl's face have relaxed and reformed into the likeness of her father.

She glances at Ø, who touches a control on his neck and closes his eyes, probing for Xian Cheng's secret.

Not to be left out, Sabine instructs her implant and dives through the scream and into Xian Cheng's chaotic psyche. She is buffeted by his psychosis like a leaf in a hurricane—and his recollection of the planetfall is not difficult to find. It haunts his subconscious like a screaming banshee, and Sabine has no trouble easing herself into his memory of the early stages of the expedition.

She is with him as he returns to the ship and makes his report to Earth, then sets out again with a carrycase of supplies. He reaches the clearing and finds the first tent-dome empty. He drops the case and runs to the next dome, unease rising within him as he finds that this too has been vacated. At the far end of the clearing, where a path leads further into the jungle, he notices the signs of a disturbance; soil has been kicked up, undergrowth broken. He guesses that they made a sighting of an alien and rushed out to follow it. He calls his first officer and requests assistance, then sets off at a run into the jungle.

He arrives at the next clearing and halts, for what he sees through the twilight of the undergrowth fills him with fear. The six scientists are sprawled about the clearing, on their backs and unconscious—though it is not their disablement that horrifies him... Squatting on the chest of each scientist is a small creature the size of an ape, but hairless; something

about their proprietorial postures suggests malevolence. Each creature has one hand over a scientist's face, long fingers spanning their foreheads.

Cheng utters a low moan at the sight of this and backs from the clearing, but before he can turn and run an alien leaps at him, hitting his chest and forcing him to the ground. It clings to him and reaches out for his face ... and Cheng is powerless to resist.

What happens next, Sabine realizes distantly, is what killed Cheng's scientists, and what would have killed Laxmi and her colleagues but for their rescue by the androids.

The alien touches Cheng, and in that first second of contact Sabine is aware that it means no harm. It does not intend to kill or even frighten the Earthman. This, among the natives of Kalki II, is a ritual form of greeting — a sharing of one individual's consciousness with another. Unfortunately for the Terrans, the aliens possess so unique and disturbing a view of reality that the human mind finds such knowledge impossible to assimilate, and then simply terrifying ...

The aliens are aware of the process of entropy not just as an abstract concept as humans understand it, but as a physical and observable phenomenon. When the alien communicates with Cheng, he — and, through him, Sabine — has a shattering glimpse of the dissolution of the universe. They witness decay on a cosmic scale: the coming apart of the atom, which in reality covers immeasurable aeons, is compressed into a time-span they can comprehend. Reality is revealed in a condition of constant annihilation. Cheng is about to scream, and Sabine with him, when the alien breaks contact and scurries away.

The natives are gathered at the far side of the clearing, staring mutely at the scientists as if in disbelief at their deaths. Then, suddenly, they scatter into the jungle and disappear. Cheng manages to gather himself and stagger back towards the ship, and an hour later he is found — ranting and delirious — by the first officer and an engineer.

Sabine finds herself reliving the point of contact with the appalling alien vision. She dives into the sensation again and again. Cheng escaped full contact and survived; his scientists were over-exposed, and perished as a result. Laxmi and her colleagues, it is now clear, experienced contact between these degrees, and screamed with a psychic agony that ripped through the *nada*-continuum and communicated with receptive minds on Earth. At last Sabine comes to understand their pain.

And she screams.

Three days later Sabine has recovered sufficiently to travel. She takes the sub-orb to Bombay and meets Østergaard at the spaceport. After security clearance, they are driven across the wide-open, dusty apron of the arrivals' field. In the distance, the *Pride of Udaipur* squats on its hydraulics like some malevolent, alien reptile. Yet to undergo a repair job after its journey through the *nada*-continuum, the *Udaipur* presents an excoriated and battle-scarred exterior. At the sight of it, and all it represents, Sabine experiences the sickness of grief rising within her chest.

She listens with her mind, desperate to have contact with Laxmi, however terrible that contact might be. But all she can hear now is a silence more profound than anything she has ever experienced. The scream is a mere distant, remembered echo.

The *Pride of Udaipur* has been dirtside two days now and, according to Østergaard, the proximity of the source of the scream has scoured the heads of every telepath on Earth, not just grade-ones as before. Many have been driven insane and, in O's Agency alone, a dozen to suicide.

Sabine asks, "Can anything be done ...?"

Østergaard indicates a fleet of trucks positioning themselves around the bigship. Massive baffles, like radio-telescopes, are being erected alongside the *Udaipur*'s flanks. "I have my finest engineers working on some way of muffling

the scream —"

"I meant," Sabine says, "for Laxmi and the crew."

"Oh ..." Østergaard is silent for a second, chastened. "There's a team of medics working on them right at this moment ..."

They make the rest of the journey in comparative quiet. From time to time, Ø speaks into his handset, liaising with his engineers. They drive into the hold of the bigship via a ramp and climb from the shuttle. A uniformed official leads them to the suspension chamber. Østergaard restrains Sabine with a gentle hand on her arm.

She turns, regarding him.

He is uneasy. "Please ... have you considered this? Laxmi is in pain ... She's no longer the person you knew. It would be easier for you if —"

"If I just walked away and tried to forget about it?"

"I didn't mean it like that —"

Sabine turns and makes her way along the corridor. She recalls the onset of the scream, all those months ago. When it became clear what the scream was, a part of her had sought to identify with the pain of the interstellar transmission. Likewise three days ago, when she discovered at last the reason for the scream, she had submerged herself again and again in the depths of Xian Cheng's tortured subconscious. This visit to her lover is the logical progression of that masochism ...

They arrive at a triangular door, point down, which lifts to reveal a similarly shaped chamber. The floor is a narrow strip down which they walk. On either sloping side are set half a dozen suspension pods. Around each one is a team of medics.

Ø steers Sabine to the pod containing the Indian Spacer she once knew as Laxmi Begun, and she steels herself for the shock.

Laxmi is no longer young and attractive. The experience she has undergone Out-there has aged her, turned her hair grey and scored deep, unattractive lines in her face. The old woman is arched, as if in a prolonged spasm of pain.

At the evidence of Laxmi's physical agony, Sabine wishes that she had her old ability to probe, so that she might join her lover in the ecstasy of her suffering.

Laxmi's rolling eyes locate Sabine and lock on. The contact sends a jolt through Sabine, paralyzing her. She is aware of Ø and the medics, watching.

Laxmi reaches out, not to take Sabine's hand in a gesture of greeting, but to point in accusation.

The sinews of her neck stand out, and her lips form a rictus as if to scream. But all that comes out is a grating whisper. "Why ...?"

"Laxmi?" Sabine cries.

Then, "You should have ... let me die!"

As she stares down at the tortured woman, she recalls the afternoon five years ago when she first discovered Laxmi on the charpoy, and the irony of the situation slices through her and twists like a blade.

She turns to Østergaard.

He stands in consultation with his medics, and slowly shakes his head.

"I'm sorry ..."

Sabine runs from the chamber, conscious only of the need for air. She enters the hold and stands at the top of the ramp, breathing deeply and staring out over the spaceport.

Down below, the first of the trucks drives away, taking a baffle with it, and only then does she begin to weep.

She is aware of Ø at her side.

"I know how you feel," he says.

She stares at him. "Do you?"

"I saved you once, Sabine ..."

He looks at her with an expression in his eyes that could be compassion, and then takes her hand in his. □

Guest Editorial

Interface

David Pringle

Hello. This is the editor of *Interzone* speaking. If you're confused, I should explain that what you see before you is an issue of *Aboriginal Science Fiction* in which the contents have been entirely selected by the editors of the British *sf* magazine, *Interzone*. This is a once-only exercise which we hope you find rewarding. It gives you the opportunity to sample *IZ*'s wares, and to decide whether or not you might be interested to read further in our magazine.

Just to get the necessary boasting out of the way, let me state that *IZ* has been going for nine years, moving from quarterly to bimonthly to monthly publication. It has been nominated for a Hugo Award for the past five years in a row. If it has failed to win a Hugo so far, this is largely, we believe, because most American *sf* fans have not had an opportunity to read the magazine. We hope to rectify that situation with this unusual *Aboriginal/Interzone* swap.

We are grateful to the generous Charles C. Ryan for the opportunity to bring you the stories and articles which follow. And we have reciprocated by opening the pages of *Interzone* to him and the regular *Aboriginal* contributors. Our issue 47, mailed to our subscribers in April 1991, consisted of a line-up of stories and non-fiction pieces which you have already seen in these pages — stories by the talented Harlan Ellison, Frederik Pohl, Lawrence Watt-Evans, Lois Tilton and others, plus columns by Robert Metzger, Darrell Schweitzer, Susan Ellison and, not least, that Crazy Alien publisher. We are waiting with great interest to hear what our British (and other) readers made of the *Aboriginal* material.

Now it's your turn, as regular *Aboriginal* readers, to respond if you wish to the *IZ* material. We are proud of what you will find in these pages, for it consists in the main of stories and pieces by fairly new writers we have discovered or nurtured over the past few years: all are British apart from one, Greg Egan, who is Australian. Another of our writers, Nicola Griffith, emigrated to the United States about 18 months ago. The longest established of the authors

represented here, Garry Kilworth, lives for the time being in Hong Kong. All of the others cling to the shores of the British Isles but, as you will discover, they are not averse to setting their stories in America and further afield.

Subscribe to *Interzone* at a Special Rate

The following two paragraphs are Charles C. Ryan's words, as addressed to *IZ* readers in its "special *Aboriginal* issue." I have just amended and turned them around slightly in order to direct them back at *Aboriginal*'s readers:

We'd like to know what you think. And, if you like what you see, we have a special subscription offer for you elsewhere in this issue (on page 39). The special offer will let you subscribe to *Interzone* at a reduced rate (for this one time only) and you can send the payment in care of *Aboriginal* in US dollars, so you won't have to worry about sending subscription monies overseas. Or, if you have a MasterCard or Visa, you can order directly from *Aboriginal*, and the payment will appear on your account in dollars.

And, of course, we welcome letters to the editor(s). We would very much like to know what you think of this international swap of fiction and whether you would like to see more. Don't worry, we don't plan to intrude into the pages of *Aboriginal* again, but it may make sense to create a US edition of *Interzone* and/or a British edition of *Aboriginal*. It's in your hands. Let us know what you think with your letters and with your subscription applications.

Meet Mark Harrison: — Artist Extraordinary

Finally, a word about this issue's special full-colour art. Normally we run only black-and-white illustrations in *Interzone*, with full-colour art confined to the front cover, and occasional two-colour tinting for the interiors. In order to oblige the editor and regular readers of *Aboriginal*, however, we have come up with a representative portfolio of work by the remarkable British artist Mark Harrison. All of the pictures you'll find herein have already been used as paperback book covers — but only in England, so the chances are that most US readers will not have seen



them before. (Mark Harrison has also done gorgeous work for Bantam Books and other publishers in the States, but we avoided re-using any of those particular covers.)

If you are as impressed by this artist's work as we are, we strongly recommend that you seek out his large-format book, Mark Harrison's *Dreamlands*, recently published in Britain with a text by *sf* writer Lisa Tuttle. The publisher is Dragon's World Ltd., 26 Warwick Way, London SW1V 1RX, England, and the book is priced at £16.95 (hardcover) or £9.95 (softback). Copies may be bought directly from the publisher at the quoted prices (plus £2.50 per book for postage, payable by international money order), but you might be best advised to purchase it through the specialist science-fiction bookdealer of your choice. (See dealers' ads in *Aboriginal*, *Locus*, *SF Chronicle* and elsewhere.) Any dealer worth his or her salt should be importing copies of this lovely book into the United States. If they're not doing so, shame on them: bug them until they do! □

Another word

(As it appears that there won't be space for my usual column in this issue, I'll use what's left of David's space to keep everyone up to date on what is happening with the magazine.)

Our Alien Publisher apparently struck a raw nerve with its expression of otherworldly views in its column last issue and it drew some sharp retorts, which we will run in the next issue.

The next issue will mean a return to a regular cast of characters.

David and I would also really like to hear your opinions about *Interzone*. Would you like to see *Interzone* published in the United States on a regular monthly basis (with its normal black & white art)?

If so, please let us know and send along any other comments you might have about this first-of-its-kind swap of editorial content.) —Charles C. Ryan

Ten Days That Shook the World

By Eugene Byrne and Kim Newman

Thursday, December 19, 1912. The Union Stockyard, Chicago, Illinois.

Dash!" Only Carter called him that. Sam heard his fellow Pinkerton's shout and turned, revolver drawn. He did not want to shoot anyone today, much less a starving Wobbly, but he was here to protect the President-elect. And the Rough Riders, a mounted band of volunteer strike-breakers and gadabout gallants, were going to be in trouble if Teddy didn't back down.

Outside the gates of the Union Stockyard, the pickets had been reinforced. Among the ragged, desperate placard-wavers — meat-packers who had been laid off or who had had their wages cut — were a few cooler fish, tough-looking birds who looked a sight readier for a fight than the glory hounds trotting along behind Teddy, tall in their saddles, shotguns resting on their thighs, revolvers in buttoned-down chamois holsters on their hips.

Sam looked across the street, trying to see his partner. Nicholas Carter was half-way up a lamp-post, waving furiously, pointing at the President. Teddy must think he was back in Cuba two terms, three elections and one political party ago. Mounted on a splendid grey, he was ambling out of the ranks of the Rough Riders, easing his way through the cordon of Irish cops, entering alone the space of some twenty yards between the pickets and the law.

The President was either going to make a speech or call a charge. Sam wouldn't have advised either course. For the first time, he truly saw the face of the man whose life he was charged with preserving. The famous grin was still there, and the round spectacles, but everything else was sagging, fading, flaking away. Sam had heard the newly elected "Bull Moose" Progressive was not in the pink of health. He looked older than fifty-four.

The strikers' placards stopped waving, and the noise died. Sam could hear the clip-clop of the presidential horse's hooves. By the force of his legendary presence, Teddy had quelled, at least for a few moments, the fury of the crowd. Sam hoped the President would try appealing to reason. He would fail, but bloodshed might be put off.

You can't tell men whose wives and children have no food in their bellies to go home and be peaceable, to thank God for their blessings. Especially not if you intended to pot a few of them for sport and pose with the corpses for the rotogravure, then dine on pheasant under glass at a mayoral reception for the victor of poll and picket line. For the bulk of the people in this angry street, it was going to be a meagre Christmas.

Teddy surveyed the strikers, baring his teeth like an angry rat. Sam wished he had a shot of whisky in his hand.

This whole tour was getting nervier and nervier. Last night, Teddy had gorged himself in splendour with Colonel Cody at the Biltmore, after watching the show. Buffalo Bill's Wild West and Pawnee Bill's Far East. Teddy and the colonel were old friends; the original Rough Riders had taken their name from Buffalo Bill's earlier show, the Wild West and Congress of the Rough Riders of the World. All through the spectacle, Sam had been on edge, unable to hear Frank Butler shoot a bauble without involuntarily reaching for his gun.

There had been pickets outside the arena. Teddy had mistaken them for well-wishers and insisted on taking a bow. Carter had nobly stepped in front of a rotten egg meant for the President. Next time it might not be an egg.

Sam was drinking again. This triumphal tour, to sort out

the local difficulties and see off this foulart Debs," was wavering between force and disaster. Whatever happened, his nerves would suffer. At the second reception last night, which Carter contemptuously called "the servants' ball," even the lesser performers in Cody's Cavalcade had been dubious about the situation. All over the country, he had been hearing similar sentiments.

It was hard to believe that Teddy had won his election only six weeks ago, beating the incumbent, his former Republican party-mate Taft, into third place after the Democrat Wilson. The first strikes had already begun while the polls were being counted. "One big union, one big strike," Eugene Debs had said, throwing what little weight the IWW had behind the stockyard employees. Debs's little weight was growing, Sam knew. At almost a million votes, the Socialist had come a long way behind even Taft in the polls, but, rushing about the country in his Red Special, he had been garnering increasing support. And if Teddy wanted to shoot a few thin-limbed meat-packers today, Debs would pick up more votes, more hearts, more guns ...

"If that man's not careful," the small woman who shot so prettily in the arena had said, "he'll be carrying an ounce or two of lead under his well-filled waistcoat."

Teddy raised his arm, and Sam's heart spasmed. He was going to signal a charge! No. Sam breathed again as the President began to speak.

"Stand aside, and let these honest men through," he belated.

The pickets were in control of the Union Stockyard, inside and out. Sam heard Debs himself was sitting in the foreman's office, cronies Big Bill Haywood and Joe Hill with him, organizing his campaign like a great general.

Teddy signalled for his Rough Riders to advance and they did, at a surprisingly disciplined trot. Half were society heroes, parading their elegant horses, but the rest were veterans of Teddy's campaigns, knuckle-heads who wanted a legal opportunity to shed some Red blood, and paid thugs. The cops, most of whom had relatives on the other side of the street and were here under threat of being fired, melted away to the sides of the advance. A few quivering, shabbily dressed figures crept behind the horsemen.

"These honest men," Teddy said, indicating the creepers, "wish to work."

"Scabs," someone shouted.

The riot nearly started then. Everyone was shouting something. Sam saw Carter pulled down from his lamp-post by a cop, and wave his Pink badge as if he were brandishing the sword of God. The Agency had rank in anything to do with the President's safety.

He had to get near Teddy. Then, he could see what was coming. He pushed through the horses, ignoring the well-spoken and foully spat oaths showered on him, holding up his badge and his gun like free passes to a ball-game.

There was scuffling at the gates, as strike-breakers with axe handles and baseball bats got in there to clear a path for the "scabs" Teddy had sworn to shepherd right onto the killing floor. "One big union, one big strike," the pickets were chanting. More pickets were flowing out from somewhere, adding strength to the human defences. Sam knew Teddy had underestimated Debs. The "dreaming blow-hard" was a better general than anyone gave him credit for.





Sam was close to the President now. Teddy's face was flushing red in spots, and the cold turned his breath to fog. If there had to be a fight, he was ready for it. He had his own gun out now. The man who was too tender-hearted to shoot a bear cub was about to gun down some of his fellow Americans. Their crime, as Cody's lady sharp-shooter had said, was "wanting to protect their families from cold, hunger and disease."

Sam was the only one close enough to hear Teddy's last word, "Bully!" The shot neatly broke the President's spectacles. Sam saw a red trickle run down the side of Teddy's nose, and realized that the back of the man's head was blown away, his slouch hat with it.

As Teddy tumbled from his rearing horse, a barrel-shaped corpse, the Rough Riders met a hail of projectiles from the roof of the stockyards, and pickets laid into strike-breakers with ferocity. Sam was the only one who knew the President was dead.

He knew where the shot had come from. Taking his blows, he pushed through the fighting. Someone hit him in the side with a bludgeon, and he thought a few ribs were staved in. He forced himself on, teeth gritted against the pain.

There were other shots now, from the Rough Riders. The scion of one wealthy family was pulled from his saddle, and soundly kicked, his gun passed to a picket.

Sam saw the small figure running away, and wondered if Teddy had been brought down by a child. There were plenty of hungry children in the IWW. Suddenly, a path was clear, and Sam ran through it, hurdling groaning bodies, escaping from the press of people.

"Halt," he shouted, a stab of pain in his lungs, icy wind in his face. Cold salt tears filled his eyes.

The fleeing assassin did not stop. He was slow, though, wheezing. Sam was gaining on the killer. He could either stop, take careful aim, and bring him down, risking a miss and the assassin's escape. Or he could keep running, and hope his injury didn't stop him before he caught up with the gunman.

He ran on, shouldering past a fat woman wearing a "READY FOR TEDDY" sash. The noise of the fighting was spreading, as was the riot itself. Sam outpaced the chaos, fixing his attention on the faltering figure in the long overcoat and big cap, scarf wrapped around his face.

The assassin stumbled. Sam covered the twenty yards between them, his lungs screaming. He threw himself on the killer, landing a blow with the butt of his revolver. The scarf came away, and Sam recognized the face. The small, bundled-up figure was not a child, but a woman.

He expected her to shout "long live the revolution" or some Red slogan. Instead, she seemed relieved, and was trying to sit up, trying to get back her breath. His own heart was hammering, and he tasted blood in his mouth.

"Annie," he said, "why?"

"*Sic semper tyrannis*," she quoted.

He eased off her, and slumped against a wall, wondering how badly he was hurt inside. Her hands were on him, feeling for his wounds.

"Never was an Indian fighter," she said, "but I've seen enough falls and spills in the Wild West to know some bone-setting. Bite."

He sank his teeth in his coat cuff as she wound her scarf around his chest. The pain grinded and peaked as his bones ground back together, and then faded. She walked away.

Later, Samuel Dashiell Hammett would tell himself he had let her go. But now he was too weak and too confused to do anything about the woman who had killed Theodore Roosevelt, the last democratically elected president of the United States of America.

Tuesday, March 4, 1913. The Capitol, Washington, D.C.

Reed was not the only one in the crowd with war wounds. He had picked up his bruises in Paterson, New Jersey, where he had been trying to organize a strike of silk-workers. One night a group of men in flour-sack hoods had come to his boarding house and burned it down. Reed and the other two Wobblies were lucky to get out alive. Since Roosevelt's fall, a lot of good union men had been killed. There were wars in the offing, and not just in Mexico or Europe.

He was at the inauguration on his press ticket, although he didn't have a paper to write for any more. The police and the Pinkertons had closed down *The Masses*, *Liberator* and any other organ of dissent they could sniff out. Even Hamilton Holt's liberal magazine *The Independent* had had its offices closed down and sealed. The assassin was still unknown, thus beyond even a rich man's justice. Therefore, the hawks of the House of Have were swooping down on anyone who raised voice against them. The "plutes" hadn't reacted so violently when President McKinley had been shot by a solitary, crazed anarchist. This was different, and everyone knew it. Everyone had to decide which side he was on in the coming war. The War of the Classes.

He could not bear to listen to the President's swearing-in or the inaugural address. The former he knew by heart and the latter he had already read in the *New York Inquirer*. In theory, Kane had given up his newspaper interests — to his teen-age son — when he consented to be Roosevelt's running mate, but in practice the President's papers were still his mouthpiece. In a sense, that was good news. At least you could guarantee the Pulitzer and Hearst press printed an approximation of the truth, out of enmity for the rival plutocrat if not devotion to the betterment of society.

Reed felt he had had to come, just to see the circus. He turned his coat collar up against the blast and wandered among the crowds, keeping a wary eye out for policemen. Nothing had been announced yet, but he was sure he was on the Pinkertons' Red list. The celebrations were genuine, but muted. Even Taft — aptly the fattest president ever to squeeze into the White House — had rated more real enthusiasm.

In his speech, Kane was reassuring America that things were going to change but the old values would be preserved. Power and privilege would pass on intact to the next generation of robber barons. A whole raft of anti-trust laws — which, barely ten years before, Kane's papers had vigorously supported — were due to be revoked, and a friendly new family system was being readied.

Beside Kane was his silly wife, Emily, bear-like in her shroud of furs. And next to the First Lady stood her spiritual adviser, the completely bald Englishman who styled himself the Great Beast and was rumoured to have put a curse on Roosevelt to bring his patron's husband to power. J.P. Morgan and Andrew Carnegie were not on the platform, content to stay in the warm and let their fellow club-man toss a few waves to the mobs while they drank brandy in their libraries. Born in a Colorado boarding house, the new President was something of a joke to his peers.

The bunting looked surprisingly cheap for a man of solid financial standing, and a party who had fought and won an election with the backing of bankers and industrialists who treated dollars like footsoldiers, sending them out as cannon fodder to overwhelm the opposition. Short measure had always been a secret tenet of Carnegie's "Gospel of Wealth," Reed supposed.

John," someone said, nearby. Reed turned, and saw a mask of grinning bandages.

"Jack?" he breathed.

The face nodded under his hat. Reed felt his own bruise, and was appalled at the extent of the injury his comrade must have suffered.

"No," London shook his head, reading Reed's thought, "it's a disguise."

Reed might have laughed.

"I'm hoping the Pinks won't think of looking for me here."

"Everyone's on the look-out for assassins."

London snorted through his bandages. "Have you heard the rumour that it was me?"

Reed had, and had not been sure. There were people in the IWW, or affiliated to it, who would not hesitate to shoot a president or two. Jack London was certainly one of their number. If it came to the opportunity and he had a revolver rather than a notebook and pencil in his travelling case, so was John Reed.

"My favourite story," London said, "is that it was Jesse James, come back for another crack at the Pinks."

London steered him through the crowd, away from the very visible row of bodyguards and police.

"All the bars are shut," London complained, "I've heard they're thinking of making the country go dry. Brewers are mainly German, you know. The working men could better spend their dollars and cents on American goods."

"A mistake, I think. If a man is denied the opportunity of seeking oblivion in alcohol, he will need to hold his head high. And to do that, he needs to be free ..."

London did not seem impressed with the argument. Reed knew his comrade was a drinker.

"Should we perhaps take the opportunity of visiting the Constitution?" London suggested. "To see if Ford or Cross are busy rewriting selected clauses?"

"A slave-owners' charter," Reed said.

London shrugged. All around, white marble was lightly frosted with the persistent cold. There were uniformed police, ranks of soldiers in their dress blues and obvious Pinkerton men patrolling or on sentry duty in every street. The capital city was under military rule.

Eugene Debe was in South America, Reed knew. Theodore Dreiser, Emma Goldman and Max Eastman were in jail, thinking and debating; Big Bill Haywood, Joe Hill and canny old Daniel De Leon were on the run, agitating and organizing. Every week, the Kane press gloated over the capture of a new "ring-leader," inevitably branding him as the man who pulled the trigger or the man who sold the gun or the man who gave the order. Two days ago, the Pinkertons had gone so far as to arrest eighty-two-year-old Mary Harris Jones and to charge her under the new Emergency Powers Acts. Mother Jones had been in West Virginia, at a coal strike, in the midst of a battle between armed miners and federal troops. She had been hand-cuffed and dragged away, her skirts raised and tied over her head.

"Look," London said, pointing.

They were by the Lincoln Memorial, and Jack London was looking upwards, at the massive white statue of Abraham Lincoln in repose.

Reed could not see it, but London told him something that would be repeated, at first as a whisper, then as a cry of rage.

While Charles Foster Kane was being inaugurated as President, the statue of Lincoln was weeping tears of ice.

Friday, October 9, 1914. S.S. Titanic, North Atlantic.

They had only been out of Liverpool two days, but the orchestra in the First Class Saloon had taken every available opportunity to defiantly play the liner's special anthem, "Sail on Great Titanic." Weiss was heartily sick of the tune, but it was not his part to complain. The crew knew their countrymen were fighting for the existence of their nation and probably saw any celebration of British achievements as a patriotic duty. "Sail on Great Titanic," he hummed, "the ship that will never go down ..."

The rest of the orchestra's repertoire was strictly jingo as well. Even Strauss waltzes had been struck from the card. There was, however, one patriotic song they wouldn't do. An

hour ago, as the captain was dining with some socialites who were fleeing to America to evade their duty, the band played a song Weiss had heard frequently in Britain before he left. He didn't know the title, but the refrain went, "Oh we don't want to lose you, but we think you ought to go ...". It was a catchy melody, the words encouraging young men to sign up to fight for "your king and your country." For a moment, the room had fallen silent. The captain had flushed red and, it was rumoured, had to be dissuaded from clapping the bandleader in irons.

Weiss stood on the deck, watching the full moon in the waters. His supple hands were feeling the cold. The great White Star liner was moving at full speed, trying to dash away from the British Isles, and away from the U-boats as quickly as possible. Of course, not even the fiendish Hun would sink an unarmed passenger liner. Just to make sure they got the message, the master had ordered as much light be shown as possible and had forbidden any curtains to be closed until they were well into the North Atlantic.

Despite the chill, Weiss stayed outside, mainly to avoid the colonel. The colonel was in a perpetual rage, and Weiss knew better than most the reasons for his colourful cholera. On the edge of bankruptcy, William Cody had been counting on "playing before the crowned heads of Europe" on one more tour before retiring. He resented the way his "close personal friend" Kaiser Wilhelm had invaded Belgium, dragging all the royal cousins and connections into a spat that was obviously going to rule out further engagements on the continent for the duration.

All the British hired hands had upped and enlisted, leaving the colonel unable even to entertain the Crowned Head of England. Now, the great Indian fighter and frontier scout was having to transport, out of his own shallow pocket, over 100 of his ropers, riders, shooters and showmen from war-ravaged Europe to the safety of America.

Weiss wished he had kept his act to himself, and refused to accept the colonel's offer of a prominent position on the bill of the Wild West. The offer had been generous, because Cody had needed the Houdini name to revive flagging interest in his Wild West. He was especially irked by the great showman's current bugbear, his theory that the entire war was a conspiracy by Jews to undermine the strength of the white races. Everyone knew, he claimed, that it was a Jew who had shot Roosevelt.

Houdini sounded a lot less Jewish than Erich Weiss, but the eagle-eyed colonel could surely not be stupid enough to be unaware of his ethnicity. In London, Weiss had been assailed twice by patriotic citizens who assumed from his real name that he was a German. Europe was one trap from which he was especially pleased to make an escape.

Looking at the dark waves, Weiss saw a white flick of foam and the black snake-neck of the periscope. Then, the two fluffy trails of white in the water, catching the light as they neared the side of the great liner.

He looked around, but there was no one else on deck, no one to alert ...

He felt the explosions before he heard them.

Taking a deep breath, which he knew from experience he could hold longer than anyone alive, he was ready for the curtain of water.

Tuesday, May 9th, 1916. Chemin des Dames, France.

General Tom can't know about this," said Private G Bartlett, face pale and sick under streaks of mud. "Else he'd do something to help us guys."

Sam wasn't sure about that. He had had his doubts about General Tom ever since the Kane press started calling him "the American Alexander." The suspicion had always been that Black Jack Pershing was supposed to run the war while

General Tom posed for all the photographs, made the speeches and kissed the babies. He was the handsomest officer Sam had ever seen, fond of his white ten-gallon hat and pithy guts-and-glory slogans. He had been with Roosevelt in Cuba, he said, and had been friends with the martyred Colonel Cody. He claimed he had a personal reason to get that rat, Kaiser Billy.

The story now was that Roosevelt had been struck down by a German bullet, the first of the Great War. Sergeant Hammett had never told what he knew, and had even been strangely pleased when he read in the accounts of the sinking of *Titanic* that Annie Oakley had survived, pulled out of the water by that funny little escapologist who had given his own life trying to save so many others in the freezing waters.

The shelling had been continuous for a week. Most of the men in the forward trenches were dead. The barbed-wire forests were splintered into the mud. Sam thought he had an ear infection, and was on the point of going deaf.

With Eddie, Hemingway and Dobbs, he had drawn the worst detail imaginable in the U.S. Expeditionary Forces. Digging out the dead, recovering personal effects and weapons. Between them, they were about all that was left of the 350th Machine Gun Battalion.

This was *Chemin des Dames* to the French, known in the U.S. Army as Ladies' Walk or, more poetically, the Road of the Damned. Officially a fortress, it was a muddy network of trenches, tunnels, artillery and gun positions, and huge underground galleries for use as living quarters, magazines and rudimentary hospitals. In summer, with a lot of work and without anyone throwing explosives at it, *Chemin des Dames* might have been a giant sandcastle, ideal for children playing soldiers. As it was, it was Sam's idea of Bloody Hell on Earth.

Eddie Bartlett, a cheerful mechanic back in Brooklyn, was still smiling. He had one of those faces that wouldn't work any other way, and his fixed grin was horribly contradicted by his shattered eyes. Hemingway, a kid who had lied about his age to get into the action, was taking it quietly, saying less, getting on with the work. Fred Dobbs — Fred C. Dobbs, as he insisted — was bitching and griping, malingering as usual.

Sam thought the privates were all near their breaking points. They had not slept since the shelling began. It was almost impossible.

There had been a trench here, but now it was just a packed-in heap of earth and bodies. Bartlett and Hemingway dug with their entrenching tools, scraping away clods from the ruins of men.

Weeks before last autumn's major offensive on the Somme, Pershing had been on a tour of the front lines. He had been standing next to a battery of field artillery during a practice, and a defective shell — like one in five of the shells supplied the army — had exploded in a breech, riddling him with steel splinters. Since then, Sam feared General Tom really had been in charge of the conduct of the war. That would explain the crazy, contradictory orders that occasionally filtered through to the front.

In the Somme, the Americans had exchanged half a million men for two hundred square miles of territory the enemy had intended to yield anyway when they pulled back to positions they had been preparing for months. Since then, it had been a question of dig in, and get shelled, gassed, shot at, diseased, maddened or bombed.

A large slab of earth fell away, disclosing the grinning, red-furred skull of a dead doughboy. Months ago, all four soldiers would have vomited instantly. Now, this was a commonplace. The skull still had staring blue eyes. He tried not to think this might have been someone he had known. With the rate of "replacements," it was unlikely. One infantry unit of seven hundred men had been sustaining such a high casualty rate that almost 7,000 soldiers might pass through it within a single year.

Ten Days That Shook ...

Dobbs was a long-haul veteran, but Bartlett and Hemingway were *Cody Soldiers*, part of the flood who enlisted after the Kaiser sank Buffalo Bill. A recruiting poster had shown the fierce-bearded American at the bottom of the sea, waving a vengeful fist at a retreating U-boat. Kane had wanted the war because it was good for newspaper circulation, good for business, good for taking citizens' minds off rumoured abuses in Washington. Factories were turning out defective shells very profitably. The Old World was taking a pounding, the titled aristocracy sinking into the mud of France, and the energetic young forces of American capital were cleaning up.

A month ago, ten soldiers of a unit posted in the front line between the Oise and Aisne rivers had been tried for mutiny and executed. Their mutinous act had consisted of being driven insane by the deaths of everyone around them.

A few, like Bartlett, still believed that General Tom was with them. Everyone else was sunk in a mud of despair. Sam knew murders were being committed every day by sullen, desperate, fed-up soldiers who knew they would be dead soon and had nothing to lose. An unpopular NCO could not expect to outlive the week. The officers were in a bad state, afraid of their own men as much as of the enemy. Back home, fortunes were being made. Here, death was like a black gas cloud enveloping them all.

Since the German offensive began, everything had been falling apart, and most of the supply services around *Chemin des Dames* had broken down. Positions had been lost through lack of ammunition, fighting men had collapsed from hunger and exhaustion for want of food provisions, wounded soldiers had died unnecessarily through lack of basic hygiene and medical supplies. The Germans, with saw-toothed bayonets and flamethrowers, might make it worse, but things were going to Hell quite nicely, thanks to American inefficiency and blundering.

"We should try to talk to the general," Bartlett said, hitching his shoulders nervously. "He's a regular guy, he'd try to help ..."

Sam was coughing again, and Hemingway had to help him up. His lungs had been weak since his ribs were broken, and the climate around here was not good for his health. He thought he might have caught a whiff of gas somewhere along the line.

He could easily understand how the German commanders thought. The French would fight harder than the British because they were defending their country, and the British would fight harder than the Americans because if France fell, Britain would be next. Therefore, it was sound military sense to concentrate the offensive on the American lines. If they could break through between Noyon and Soissons, they might even have a chance to march on Paris.

"General Tom is in that chateau at that place, Crappy ...?" "Crépy-en-Valois," Hemingway said, quietly.

"Yeah, there. We could go see him, tell him how it really is, cut through all their staff officers telling him lies."

Sam coughed, painfully. "That'd be mutiny, Eddie," he said, his words not coming out properly.

"He should know about the rifles that fall apart," Bartlett said, "the shells that don't work, the orders that don't make sense ..."

Sam agreed. Hemingway nodded too. Tom Mix certainly ought to know about those things.

"A man alone ain't got no bloody fucking chance," Hemingway said, eyes old beyond his years. Sam guessed the kid was not yet seventeen. He was a reader, who carted Stephen Crane's *The Red Badge of Courage*, Jack London's *The Iron Heel*, and Upton Sinclair's *The Jungle* in his duffel, even if they were mostly on the proscribed list drawn up by Kane's postmaster, Will H. Hays.

"Hem," Bartlett said, "you can write good. Let's get up a list of them complaint things ..."

"Grievances?"

"Yeah, a list of grievances. We could get all the men in the unit to sign. Then, we could go see General Tom. He'd probably be grateful to us for talking straight, telling him the true facts."

Sam was coughing so bad he had to sit down. Hemingway and Bartlett crowded around, concerned for their Sarge. Dobbs held back, leaning on his shovel, rat eyes glittering.

"Yeah," Bartlett said, wonder and belief rekindling in his face, "let's go see General Tom."

Saturday December 16, 1916. The Municipal Opera House, Chicago, Illinois.

Parker leaned against the poster, slumped so he was smaller than the female figure depicted on it, and brought up blood.

SUSAN ALEXANDER in *Thais*.

Red splattered across the young diva's face, soaking in, giving her a panicked look.

Everyone was in the auditorium, so the cavernous foyer was empty. Parker could hear the whining of the singers and the sawing of the orchestra. It was not what he would have picked to be the last thing he heard on this earth. A tiny voice struggled with the giant music.

In his ears, he could still hear the echoes of the shots. Not the ones he had taken earlier this evening, but all the others. Thirty years of gunfire, from Wyoming to Bolivia and back. What the Kid had said was true; if you didn't die young, you outlived your time. Now Parker guessed time was catching up. He had a couple in the gut, and a bastard of a bullet in his wrist, lodged between the bones.

A uniformed attendant saw him, and began limping across the acre of marble. One of his legs was tin, his young face was scarred. Since the war in Europe, America was left to cripples and relics.

He was sitting now, having slid down the poster. Blood was soaking through his starched shirtfront. At least he was dressed for the opera.

The President was in the auditorium, in a private box. Parker assumed that if what he had heard whispered about *la Alexander* were true, the First Lady and her cueball wizard would be otherwise engaged. Emily Kane must be annoyed by that, for she relished any chance to dress up. At the opening of the Ballets Russes, she had worn a gown which, according to the social column of the *Inquirer*, was made up of 100 square yards of French silk, imported from Europe despite U-boats and Zeppelins. Her diamonds were insured for a sum which would have fed an infantry division for a year.

Parker had tried to get into the army. After all, he had always made a living with his gun. But he was too old, too often-shot, too forgotten.

Still, he had served his President this evening.

The attendant was with him now, his mouth opening and closing. All Parker could hear were gunshots.

He had his gold. But now he needed more. He had done his job, and now he needed help.

"Cross," he said, "get Cross."

The attendant didn't understand.

Parker tried to stifle the pain in his gut, and said the name again, deliberately.

"Noah Cross."

Even this one-legged Cody soldier knew those were magic words.

They had met in South America, when Parker was guarding gold shipments. The Machiavelli from California had been part-owner of the mining company, walking tall in his white suit, handing out coins to fellow Americans down on their luck, puffing on cigars. Noah Cross saved people. He tucked them away until they could be useful. Parker had been tucked away for nearly twelve years, a weapon kept oiled and polished until needed.

The attendant was gone, and Parker relaxed his stomach, letting the pain grow and seep upwards.

Since the election, there had been a lot of shooting, a lot of work. Kane had won re-election but, according to the handbills you saw on the streets if the cops were tardy about closing down trouble-making printers, he had only out-pollied Wilson and Taft because of the almost unanimous support of the dead. Everyone in the Bronx Cemetery had voted Kane. There were other stories in the handbills, about the war, about the tins of army-issue beef that were offal swept from the slaughterhouse floor, explosives that were half-sawdust, gun barrels made from degraded materials that melted like wax. The Kane papers were full of victories and advances. Even after the troops rebelled, the *Inquirer* branded them as traitors in the pay of the Kaiser, not mutineers driven by appalling conditions.

There were more handbills now. Even here in the palace the President had built with federal funds for his "singer." Scraps of crudely printed paper wafted across the floor like discarded programmes, drifting against Parker's legs.

He had no sensation below his stomach.

Four years ago, the handbills would have reprinted speeches by Eugene Debs or Upton Sinclair. Now they were reporting the opinions of Woodrow Wilson. WILSON AC-CUSES, he read ...

An act must have finished, or perhaps the whole show. Parker saw the trails of elegant gowns across the marble, and perfectly pantsed legs. Inside, some were applauding, their daps rifle shots, but most of the audience were getting out before the curtain was even down.

This was society, he knew. With the president would be all his cronies, in and out of the administration. Vice President Bryan, Secretary of War Harding. Fords, Vanderbilts, Rockefellers, Dods, Carnegies, Morgans. Underneath the shooting, Parker could hear the rustle of expensive material, the clink of jewelry, the snap of silver cigarette cases. These, he knew, were the real sounds of murder.

A woman, not more than a girl, stared at him, eyes impossibly huge. She was the most beautiful thing Robert Leroy Parker had ever seen, and diamonds enough to fill a king's chest sparkled on her shallow décolletage. Her escort stepped in front of her, and knelt down.

It was Cross, a cigar in his hand.

"You were not to come here, Butch."

He slumped blood. Cross touched Parker's chest, and his fingers came away crimson-dipped. Smiling, he looked as if he wanted to lick his fingerprints clean.

A commotion was running through the crowd. Parker thought it was because of his impolite and bleeding presence, but it was the news, fresh from the street and spreading ...

"Wilson's been shot, killed..."

Cross smiled wider, a skull in a silk hat.

"You did well..." he said.

"There was a gunfight with the police. Six men dead or injured..."

"... but you weren't to come here."

Cross stood up, and, child-woman on his arm, walked away. He slipped the attendant a hundred-dollar bill.

Parker saw the crowds making way for the President. Kane shambled like an old steer, surrounded by boiled-shirt bully boys. He had learned a lesson from Teddy Roosevelt, and no one was going to get close enough to plug him.

Kane received the news. Parker didn't need to hear it. He could still remember the candidate's look as the bullets went into his lungs, cutting short his call for a congressional inquiry into Kane's conduct of the war. The President nodded briefly, and made up a speech of tribute on the spot. Cross edged away from Kane long enough not to be in any of the pictures the newsman from the *Chicago Inquirer* was taking.

Everyone flowed out of the foyer, and left Parker behind,

unnoticed. The gunshots got louder, then stopped ...

Monday, February 5, 1917. Courtroom #1,
Foley Square Courthouse, New York City.

The accused could not stop smiling, although Reed assumed he must be in a blue funk. If anyone was living on borrowed time, it was Private Edward Bartlett. He had come through the worst bloodbath of the war, and narrowly escaped summary execution without benefit of court-martial — only a general mutiny, a strike-like downing-of-tools by his comrades had prevented the carrying-out of that order — and now, back in the States, he was having to be ferried to and from the court by armed guards lest some patriotic citizen try to cheat the firing squad. To Reed, and to many others, there was no greater hero in the United States Armed Forces than Eddie Bartlett.

Judge Royston Bean, past ninety and proud of his frontier reputation, looked like a bronzed cigar store Indian on the bench. The rumour was that he still wore guns under his robes. For the prosecution, Attorney General Ransom K. Stoddard had retained society lawyer Randolph Mason, usually the elegant ornament of libel suits and divorce actions. For the defence, Clarence Darrow was quietly magisterial, weighed down with the concerns of the case, but still sharply witty. If anyone could make anything of *l'affaire* Bartlett, it was Darrow, fresh from a three-month jail sentence for contempt of Congress, a crime Reed thought a man would have to be a blind and deaf half-wit not to commit in his heart every time he opened a newspaper and saw a troop ship unloading coffins from the hold while taking conscripts onto the deck.

Reed sat with the other reporters, making notes. His job was shaky at best — he had suffered four nuisance arrests in the past year — but he had noticed lately how the Iron Grip of the House of Have was less able to contain the boiling forces of the free in mind. Four million Americans, one-tenth of the adult male population, were in France, fighting and dying for muddy inches of Europe even as Villa's raiders massed on the Mexican borders, staking a claim to considerable spreads of Texas, Arizona and New Mexico. At the height of the mutiny, one-quarter of the four million had expressed support for Bartlett. Back home, the Movement was gathering strength. Woodrow Wilson and dead-in-prison Mother Jones were martyrs of the revolution, which must be causing considerable revolutions in Wilson's grave. The Kane press was a joke, and nobody bothered with it any more, even the most conservative recognizing the truth of the handbills or folk songs no police force could stamp out. Joseph Pulitzer, a plutocrat cannily seeing a hole in the market to be profitably plugged, had been running accurate stories of the mismanagement of the war and the sufferings of "our boys at the front," a policy which even extended to hiring on John Reed, fresh from a spell as a foreign correspondent in Villa's Mexico, as a Washington commentator. The military censors had run out of blue pencils, and the muddy truth was starting to filter back to the mothers and sweethearts.

Sergeant Samuel Dashiell Hammett was giving evidence, retelling the now-familiar story of the petition of grievances Private Bartlett and his comrades had worked up, and of their month-long frustration as they tried through every legal and reasonable military channel to obtain an audience with General Mix. Darrow's questions drew out details to which Mason persistently objected as being "not germane to the case," but which, by the weight of accretion, were giving the court a powerful, unpalatable depiction of the everyday lot of the American soldier in France.

Isabel Amberson Minafer — a society matron whose own son was an officer posthumously decorated for his gallantry — had come along on Mason's invitation to see the private whose treason shamed the memory of her boy. As Hammett

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spoke, Mrs. Minafer was shaking with deep sobs, tears flooding past her tiny handkerchief, realizing at last how her country had betrayed its sons, betrayed her son.

Hammett concluded his evidence by confirming that he had been aware of Eddie Bartlett's intention to make his own way to the chateau at Crépy-en-Valois which General Mix was using as a command post, to force his way through the obstructions placed around the general by ignorant staff officers and to explain, honest man to honest man, just how things were on the front line. "Eddie was convinced that General Mix was not being told the truth by those around him," Hammett said.

Mason began his cross-examination, probing Hammett for any memories he might have of statements on the part of Bartlett which revealed Red or anti-militarist sympathies.

Treachery was the by-word of the day. The Tsar of Russia, with his new "liberal" constitution and Prime Minister Kerensky to back him up, had slipped out of the war by the Treaty of Brest-Litovsk, deeding huge tracts of land to Germany and the remains of the Austro-Hungarian Empire. Russian factories were supplying munitions to both sides in the conflict, and Americans with "off" or "ovitch" or "ofsky" on their mailboxes were changing their names as fast as a chameleon changes colours. In Europe, American lives were being freely spent by Great Britain and France, and there was a strong, popular feeling — expressed even by such unlikely personages as Henry Ford — to convince Kane and his ring to pull a "Tsar" and get out, leaving the old world to shed its own blood. After all, if Villa and the Kaiser ever ironed out their differences, America might face the opening-up of a front closer to home, and find itself underequipped to defend its own borders, all for the sake of the vanity of a few indred crowned clowns.

Mason finished his dance around Hammett, and the witness left the stand. One or two people applauded, and Mrs. Minafer would not look the prosecuting lawyer in the eye. Reed could sense sympathy for the cause welling up in the hardest of hearts. The thing that gave him the most hope was the deep division the war was bringing out within the foundations of the House of Have. Thus weakened, it could fall, or be taken by a united proletariat.

This was a show trial, but Bean was strictly enforcing the number of spectators. A few interested parties, like Stoddard and Harding, were in the courtroom with a scattering of influential commentators and administration funkies, but the sensation-seekers were mainly outside. At the opening, the guest list had been more distinguished — with Aleister Crowley, Noah Cross and Vice-President Bryan lending their presence to oversee the doing of justice — but now the society-page names were staying away, uneasily aware perhaps of how the trial was going to pan out. Bean, a knotty old bruiser Kane had hauled out of retirement to whip the Supreme Court into line, knew as well as Reed that all America, all the world, had interests in this trial, and he was not going to go down in history as the judge who let the lawyers pass a black-cap verdict on him.

The witness now was the soldier who had been with Bartlett on his visit to Crépy-en-Valois, Ernest Hemingway. Darrow cannily established the young man's credentials by asking him to explain how he had come by his medal ribbons, whereupon Mason objected and Bean, who liked a good yarn, overruled. Hemingway modestly allowed Darrow to draw from him an account of his day-and-night crawl around no-man's land under barbed wire and accurate fire, hauling home wounded soldiers. Hemingway impressed Reed, especially when his true age — sixteen — came out in court, and he had to admit he had lied to the enlistment board to get into the war. Mason sat impatiently through all this, finally objecting successfully when Darrow encouraged Hemingway to read out moving passages from the diary he had purportedly kept on the front — but which, according to newsroom

rumour, he was actually busy writing as the trial went along — underlining everything Hammett had said about the inefficiency, brutality and insanity of the war effort. Hemingway used words like a sniper might use bullets.

There was a tense little pause, and Reed knew the question everyone had been waiting for was about to be asked. Hemingway looked at Bartlett, and made a fist over his heart. The accused fidgeted, clouds of memory passing over his face.

"Private Hemingway," Darrow began, "could you describe the situation you found at Crépy-en-Valois when you and Private Bartlett arrived on the morning of Sunday, June 11th, 1916?"

Hemingway drew breath, then paused, then began, "We arrived at the chateau at about eleven o'clock. It was a warm day. There was a lull in the German shelling. There were two guards outside, and only a junior staff officer in the hall. The guards let us through when Eddie told them we had a message from the front for General Mix. We were so covered in mud they couldn't tell our rank. The junior staff officer, Lieutenant James Gatz, tried to stop us getting any further and I popped him one."

"You struck a superior officer?"

"I certainly did."

"And why did you do that?"

"I didn't care for his cologne. Cologne's a German perfume, ain't it?" Laughter rippled around.

"Was there any other reason?"

"He said General Mix was in the chateau's chapel and had given strict orders that he was not to be disturbed."

"Did anything strike you as unusual about the situation at Crépy-en-Valois?"

"Objection," said Mason, "counsel is calling for conjecture."

"Overruled," Bean said from one side of his mouth, as if spitting out a chew of tobacco.

"But ..."

"That's m'rulin," Bean insisted, glaring. "Continue, Private Hemingway ..."

"There was food, Mr. Darrow. Damn real food. Cakes and meat and bread. Potatoes and beans and coffee and wine and sugar. Eddie and me hadn't seen anything like that for months. The last meat we'd tasted was rat. I don't care for rat. It was left out on a table where there had been a dinner the night before. We couldn't understand it. They'd had all this food right there in front of them. They hadn't eaten everything. It was like finding out there were people who didn't deign to breathe air."

"And what did you do then?"

"We looked for the general in the chapel."

"And what did you find in the chapel?"

"Not General Mix. He wouldn't have been able to get in."

"Why is that?"

"It was stacked to the rafters with cases of champagne, sir."

"What did you do then?"

"We found the general's quarters. It was easy."

"How so?"

"We followed a trail."

"A trail?"

"Yes, sir."

"Of what?"

A pause. Hemingway cleared his throat. "Ladies' underthings. Lacy, perfume-smelling underthings."

Mason looked uncomfortable, and some of the spectators tittered.

"What did you find in the general's quarters?"

"General Mix. He was in a large sunken marble bath, wearing only his white ten-gallon hat. He was leaning back, pouring champagne from the bottle into his mouth. Sir, he was drunk as a skunk."

Laughter, scowls, an objection, a ruling.

"Was there anyone else present?"

"Yes, there were three women in the bath with the general, one diving under the suds between his legs, hair floating on the surface of the water, bubbles foaming around her. She was French, I believe. The others were either side of him, working with their hands. It was plain they were drunk too. I believed from the sweet smell in the air that at least one of the bathers had been smoking opium."

"Did you recognize any of the three, let us say, *filles de joie*?"

"We had a different expression for them in the army, sir. One was Gertrud Zelle, a Dutch dancer I had seen perform in Paris. And one was an American adventuress, Miss Sadie Thompson. I don't know anything about the French lady."

"How did Private Bartlett react to this sight?"

"Eddie was overcome with emotion. All this time, he had insisted General Tom was a fine soldier who loved his men but was surrounded by incompetents. This display of excess sickened and revolted him. He was struck down."

"Struck down?"

"He was unable to express himself. He kept babbling about food and women and wine and mud and shells and gas."

"What happened then?"

"General Mix squirted champagne out of his mouth at Private Bartlett and told him to fu... to go away."

"Did Private Bartlett then, as legend has it, shoot the general?"

"No, sir."

Commotion, gavel-banging, quiet.

"Eddie said a bullet was too good for Traitor Tom. Besides, there was a chance of a dud blowing up in the barrel and taking his hand off. That was happening a lot. Eddie drew his bayonet. The women got out of the way quickly. They were a damn sight less drunk than the general."

"Did you try to stop Private Bartlett assaulting General Mix?"

"No, sir. I held the general down while Eddie cut him to pieces. The blood and the champagne and the perfumed bathwater soaked right through my sleeves."

Now, all Bean's gawling could not stem the uproar in the court. Finally, he drew an antique revolver and fired a shot into the ceiling, calling for a recess. One of the raised letters of the motto behind him fell away. It now read IN GOD WE RUST.

Thursday, March 8, 1917. The Bramford, 1 West 72nd St., New York, N.Y.

From the window of Crowley's apartment, Nick Carraway could see the riots. It was dark, but there were flames even where the strikers had cut off the street-lights. There were mounted cops down there, creaky old-timers in blue uniforms while their sons and younger brothers were in khaki overseas. Many of the Reds were short a limb or otherwise scarred. It was a battle of the old and infirm, and it was turning bloody. Vance's face reflected in the dark mirror of the window, aloof and apparently unconcerned, his double slash of a moustache like a razor scar. He turned away, and Nick did too.

Tom was being hearty, talking too loud, bluff and nervous as he explained to the First Lady's astrological consultant that he was organizing a volunteer force to take over the vital services in his district once the strikers were put down. It should only be a month or two before order was restored. According to Tom, the Reds were on the run.

Nick was not so sure. Also, Tom was no actor, and all his Rover Boys cheeriness could not make the Great Beast suspicious. They said Crowley could read minds. They also said he had held a ceremony in the White House, with President and Mrs. Kane in attendance, promoting himself to the rank of magus by baptizing a frog as Jesus Christ and crucifying it.

Crowley stood in front of the fireplace, striking a Satanic Ten Days That Shook ...

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pose. His bald head gleamed in the candle light. This, Noah Cross had told Nick and Tom, was the dilettante whose ridiculous prophecies had prompted Kane to order the Vimy Ridge attack, exchanging 100,000 American casualties for not one foot of useless enemy territory. Early in the war, Crowley, an Englishman not welcome in his own country, had written anti-British propaganda for the pro-German press. After the *Titanic*, he had reused the same articles as anti-German propaganda for the Kane papers. Now, he was whimsically influencing the conduct of the war. This was the man they were here to kill.

Crowley had agreed to meet Tom Buchanan because Nick, a distant cousin of the First Lady, had intimated that his friend's influence might secure for the mystic an honorary doctorate at New Haven, Tom's school. Nick knew Cross had drawn his plans carefully here, selecting precisely the right people to appeal to the Englishman's snobbery, cruelty and self-interest. According to the canny financier, Aleister Crowley must die if the administration, if a whole class, were to have the chance to survive. Nick had almost got used to the notion of being doomed, of everyone he knew being doomed.

It was a peculiar feeling to be doing something about the doom, but Nick still didn't care to feel like a cog in Noah Cross's machine. They were all cogs in Cross's machine. Nick, Tom, Vance. And Crowley's secretary, Louella Parsons, who had helped them get this close with some discreet, well-paid manipulation of the appointments diary. Even Crowley's neighbour and fellow magus Adrian Marcato, who had delicately suggested that Tom Buchanan was a young man the Great Beast should meet, was a component of the machine. Crowley and Marcato were unashamed to declare themselves Evil Incarnate, but Nick thought Noah Cross fitted the Horned Goat mask a sight more comfortably.

They were discussing race now. Tom was hot on the Negro issue, and Crowley had prophesied a catastrophe in Texas if a single black face were found among the "army of the righteous" defending the state from Villa. Of course, the black regiments were about all the army had left over to hold the border, and their withdrawal had already allowed for a series of increasingly daring, insolent, German-advised raids against West Texas and Arizona. Nick guessed Cross was mainly annoyed that Crowley was better at influencing weak sister Kane than he was.

Tom suggested that Crowley and he drink a toast to Emily Kane. The Prohibition ordinance was in effect in New York, and Crowley couldn't offer them any of the brandy Nick knew he had stashed away. Philo Vance, who had effected the introduction between Crowley and Tom, produced a hip-flask from his inside pocket, and tossed it to Tom, who unscrewed the cap. This produced two small steel cups, one of which had been liberally smeared earlier with liquid potassium cyanide. Tom dextrously filled both cups, kept one, and gave Crowley the poisoned whisky.

The Englishman, eyes burning, knocked the liquor back, and grinned, almost in defiance. He should have been dead before the firewater hit his stomach, but he was asking for a refill.

Nick saw Tom spasming in panic, thinking he had got the cups mixed and poisoned himself. But he was alive too.

"I see you are making a mistake," Crowley said. He looked more alive than anyone Nick had ever seen.

Tom's nerve broke, and he pulled a revolver out from under his letter sweater. Crowley did not seem perturbed. Tom struggled to thumb-cock the gun.

Mrs. Parsons came into the room just as Tom shot her employer in the chest. She put her hands over her mouth, willing him to fall before he saw her treachery. Crowley kept smiling, a trickle of blood on his shirtfront. Tom shot Crowley again, low, blasting a hand resting just above the hip. One of his fingers came off. Vance had the poker in his hands, and

brought it down upon the egg-like dome of the astrologer's head, denting it, striking him to the floor. They all stood back, standing over the man who was sprawled before his fire, his dressing gown twisted around him.

Slowly, Aleister Crowley stood up. His face showed no trace of pain. He examined his hand, a small spurt of blood fountaining from the stump of his missing finger.

With a cry of rage which Nick had heard on the football field, Tom tackled the astrologer, getting a bearhug around his chest and shoving him against the wall. Vance got in a few more blows with the poker, and Nick stepped back to the windows, elbowing out a pane of glass. They were ceiling-to-floor windows, opening onto a balcony six storeys from the street. Nick unfastened the windows, and the wind blew in. Outside, Reds were shouting slogans into the night.

Mrs. Parsons was frozen with horror. Tom was grappling with Crowley. There were shouts from the street, and the clip-clop of horses' hooves. Many people were being killed tonight in New York.

Vance and Nick helped Tom get Crowley onto the balcony, then stood back as he heaved him over the side. They all watched him fall, limbs loose, and smash against the sidewalk, red spilling into the gutter from his broken head.

"That's done," Vance said, brushing dust off his dinner jacket.

Tom looked as if he did not believe it. They left Mrs. Parsons peering over the balcony and went down to the lobby by the stairs. Vance bribed the doorman while Nick and Tom went out into the street. Crowley had crawled a few feet in the gutter. Tom kicked the Great Beast in the head until he wasn't moving any more. Breathing heavily, blood and tears on his face, the football hero stood away from the dead astrologer. A group of Reds ran past, wheezing police horses on their tails. A Red paused to fire a revolver at a cop, missing wildly, and ran off.

"Assassination has become our national sport," Vance said, shivering.

Nick had left his coat upstairs. For a young man of wealth and breeding, it was a cold night in the city.

Tuesday, May 1, 1917. Union Station, Chicago, Illinois.

The Red Special's a-comin'," shouted the coloured porter as he emerged from the telegraph office. The old black man was greeted with a cheer the like of which he had obviously never heard, and his face split with a grin. To Reed, this was the face of the Movement.

Overnight, the fighting in the city had peaked and dwindled to mopping-up skirmishes, with mass defections from the police and army swelling the Red ranks. The mayor had surrendered to Joe Hill, and was locked up in the drunk tank of the nearest police station. The city's plutocrats had fled, leaving empty mansions and bewildered servants. At some point, an overenthusiastic committee of workers had burned to the ground the Municipal Opera House, President Kane's gift to the city. A regrettable waste of revolutionary energy, Reed thought, but perhaps a necessary blowing-off of steam.

At lot of people, good and bad, had died in Chicago over the years. Father O'Shaughnessy, Roosevelt, Wilson. There would be more killing, Reed knew, but it would be over soon. Then, for the second time in its history, the United States would have to go through the painful, healthy process of reconstruction.

"Out of my way, nigger," said a fat, scar-faced Italian youth as he pushed past the porter. Reed felt someone walk over his grave, but let it pass. The Movement was uniting so many creeds and colours, empowering the masses. The frictions would eventually ease: this he believed with a fierce certainty. Reed had fought alongside black and white and yellow on

picket lines for the last ten years, and he knew everyone bled the same colour. Red.

Still, he would watch the Italian kid whose gang had been passing out firebrands all night. A lot of opportunists would be trying to board the Red Special without paying their fare.

The crowds were excited, enthused, agitated. The Special had been coming for a long time. Many had given up hope of it ever arriving. Joe Hill was pacing the platform alone, looking older.

Reed had spent the night by the telegraph office, collating the words that came in from all over the country, turning terse dispatches into pointed articles. *The Masses* had managed three editions throughout the night, each the thickness of three handbills folded together. He had to catch the spirit of the moment in words, set them down for posterity. At Ossining, the Reds had taken over the prison, liberating Eddie Bartlett, the most befuddled hero of the Movement, from Death Row. In Texas, the Rangers and the last of the federal forces were fighting a scrappy guerrilla war with Villa's raiders. In Europe, there was a downing-of-tools at the front, an unprecedented uprising of the Brothers of Eddie Bartlett.

There was a pitched battle on the floor of the New York Stock Exchange. J.P. Morgan had been detained by patriots at the Canadian border, and clapped in chains. In Alabama, armed union men supported by black soldiers who had overthrown their officers had routed the Ku Klux Klan outside Birmingham. Workers' Revolutionary Committees had sprung up like mushrooms in every city, in most small towns, in army bases, firehouses, prisons. Telegrams were coming in faster than the operators could hand them out. New York, San Francisco, New Orleans, Pittsburgh, Philadelphia, Minneapolis, Kansas City. The whole map of the country was dying itself Red.

For the man on the Special it must have been a gruelling journey in a sealed railroad carriage. From Nicaragua to Chicago, passing through a theoretical battlefield on the Tex-Mex border, Eugene Debs had been guarded every foot of the way by the comrades of the Railmen's Union. History would hail them as the finest of the Movement, socialist heroes who worked the points, engineered the locomotives, set the signals, provided fuel and water, evaded the Pinkertons. At every junction, men wearing the white ribbon of the Great Pullman Strike had put themselves at risk to speed Debs to the Windy City, each as dedicated as the members of the relay team carrying the Olympic torch. Only this flame, carefully fanned and preserved, was to be set to a powderkeg that would blow up a great nation.

Reed saw London in the crowds, the bandages off at last. The writer shouldered his way through celebrating men and women, and raised a clenched fist in a boxer's salute.

"Looks like we've given the Iron Heel a Hot Foot," he said, grinning.

Like a lot of the crowd, London was intoxicated. Many were drunk on the giddy exhilaration of change, but Reed guessed London had taken other stimulants, a supposition confirmed when he passed over a bottle.

"Go on, there'll never be another day like this." Reed tipped a mouthful of whisky into his throat. The fiery gulp made him cough and blink tears. London clapped his back. "We'll make a drinker of you yet, John."

Outside on the track, a piercing steam whistle let out a lengthy blast. Reed expected the crowds to cheer and throw their hats in the air, strangers to embrace and kiss, clapping to fill the cavernous interior of the station. But instead everyone fell silent. The railroad terminal suddenly became a cathedral.

The train, an unimpressive black engine with a string of battered cattle-cars behind it, pulled in slowly, belching steam. Everyone looked at it. Reed realized he was holding

his breath, the liquor burning in his stomach.

The Special nudged the buffers, and the steam died down. Armed men, some wearing red sashes or armbands, swarmed out of the cars.

A uniformed guard, clinging to the outside of one car, unloosed bolts, and a section of the side clanged down onto the platform like a drawbridge. People stood away as if the wooden slats, dyed brown with generations of hooves and trodden-in dung, were a red velvet carpet.

Debs emerged, shielding his eyes, chin stubbled, face tanned. He wore a soiled white tropical suit that ill fit the climate, a blanket draped around him like a cloak.

"Comrades," he said, small voice filling the vaulted arches of Union Station, ultimately filling the whole of the country, "it looks as if what we have here ..."

Debs looked around, unable to contain his grin.

"... is a REVOLUTION!"

Then, the cheering began. Reed thought it would never end.

Tuesday, June 5, 1917. The Alamo, San Antonio, Republica de Mexico.

Presidente Villa was in his palace in Mexico City, poring over maps and ignoring his European advisers, and General Huerta was putting El Paso, the centre of the fiercest Texan resistance, to the sword. That left Emiliano Zapata for the purely symbolic retaking of the ruined mission in San Antonio, overrun eighty-one years earlier by Santa Anna, then taken back by the *Yanquis* in the First Mexican-American War. The one Mexico had lost, Zapata reminded himself.

He had hoped the Europeans would keep out of the way, and let him get this over without bloodshed. Of course, the die-hards of San Antonio were holed up in the mission with their grandfathers' guns, intent on being nobly massacred. A few smoke grenades would have been enough to flush them out, but the Flying Circus had to put on a show.

Faintly embarrassed at the comic-opera melodrama of it all, Zapata crouched behind the low wall at the edge of the square, his detachment cradling their carbines, ready to fire. Up in the clear blue sky, the buzzing biplanes circled. Both the von Richtofen brothers were up there, jousting like the last of the Teutonic Knights, and so was their friend Goering. The brightly-painted airplanes swooped low over the Alamo, guns chattering, and dropped smoking incendiaries.

Zapata looked behind him, to the post office where Venustiano Carranza, the Europeans' liaison, was huddled with the Russian expert, Beria. Neither would want to be too near the scuffle, just in case one of the aspiring Davy Crocketts had a clear eye and a clean rifle. Carranza was a Huerta man, wagering his gold-braid epaulettes that the Europeans would eventually prod his patron into Villa's presidential seat.

Gunsshots crackled from inside the mission, and one wall was on fire. A bullet grooved across the stone top of the wall, and spanged into the shoulder of young Angel, drawing a blurt of blood and pain. The planes were up high now, executing showoff stunts, and doing something useful by drawing the meagre fire of the men inside the Alamo. The Flying Circus were playing a game of dare, seeing which man could get nearest to the range of the groundfire. For these Germans, war was a sport of landowners, not a way of keeping bellies filled and men free.

He judged that the defenders were being choosy about their shots, and gave the order. An armoured Model T Ford, formerly the pride of the late General Mapeche's army, trundled into the square, the machine gun mounted on its steel windshield raking the walls of the mission, kicking out clouds of red dust. Grenades exploded against the makeshift barricade of the main doors, and Zapata could see into the roofless church. First over the wall, he was first at the gates, hurdling the fires with his men close behind him.

Nobody shot him.

Later, they found only seven dead men, all ancient and feeble. The soldiers who would have defended Texas were all dead in Europe, or fighting their own revolution to the North. It was this revolution the Europeans were so concerned with thwarting, concerned enough to send arms and advisers. With Russia out of the war in Europe and the new America on the point of withdrawal, an unacknowledged alliance existed between the Tsar, the Kaiser and the remnants of the former rulers of the United States. Their man in Mexico was Huerta, and Huerta had influenced Villa into pursuing the gnawing attack at the frayed southern edges of the U.S.

Up in the bell tower was a sniper who could barely get a grip on his antique Winchester .73, his arthritic knuckle too knotted to slip into the trigger guard. A couple of soldiers helped him down the ladder fairly gently, and presented him to Zapata.

The American saw Beria and Carranza coming, and commented to Zapata, "Looks like you have friends willing to defend democracy in the States to the last Mexican."

"This man," Beria said, "we should have him shot."

Zapata looked at the young Russian's cold eyes. Lavrenti Beria's English was not good, and he had no Spanish at all, but he could order an execution in a terse sentence in any language in the world. Not a soldier, he was eager to shoot anyone who did not have the power of shooting back.

Zapata looked again at the American. "I know you," he said, finally, "you were at Chihuahua City in '15, when Madero and Villa made their pact. You are the writer, Bierce."

"Am I?" said the old man, spitting bitterly.

The Germans strode into the Alamo now, in their leather flying jackets and helmets, ignoring the dust on their white britches and polished boots. There was a landowners' gait, somewhere between marching and sauntering. The Baron was at the head of his party, wearing the oily grime of battle on his cheeks like duelling scars. This von Richtofen was very like the men Zapata had spent his early life fighting.

A dog darted out from a nook in one collapsed wall, and yapped at the Baron's boots. It was a beagle, the pet of one of the defenders. The Baron took out his automatic pistol, and pumped a shot into the animal's head, kicking it dead in an instant.

"Absurd American dog," he said.

Plump Hermann laughed, and slapped his comrade on the back, raising a cloud of dust. "*Gut Essen für unsere Mexikanische Freunde, nicht wahr?*" he commented. A nice meal for our Mexican friends.

Beria and Carranza had maps out, and were scrawling their crosses and arrows.

Bierce, the old American, could hardly stand up. His leg was broken, Zapata realized, just below the knee, and he was hopping painfully, his last teeth gritted into bare gums. Only anger was keeping him alive.

"How is your friend Mr. Reed? The one who was so amusing about our President."

Bierce glared. "Red Johnny's done well for himself. Picked the right side in the revolution."

"Which revolution? Yours or ours?"

Bierce smiled, an expression which, on him, suggested more wrath than an outright scowl.

"Of course, a revolution is merely an abrupt change in mismanagement. Even so, I don't think your counts, General or Field Marshal or whatever. Red Johnny and his pack are doing their best to kick out men like my former employer, Mr. Hearst. Your crew said they'd reform the land, then threw in with ... well, with these foreign gentlemen ..."

Bierce looked at the Russian and the Germans and at Carranza, a Mexican in a uniform a Hapsburg would have recognized.

"You know what a peasant is, General? A man with a footprint for a face and a bullet in his back."

Von Richtofen and Goering were saluting each other with *schnapps* doled out from silver flasks, heels clicking smartly. The dead dog had exploded shit over the flagstones.

He gave orders for Bierce to be penned with the other resisters in the town jail. Zapata had had to shoot too many of these die-hards. He hoped the war would wind down like a clockwork toy, with no more unnecessary bloodshed.

Outside in the sun, the smoke was clearing away. The fires were out. Worried-looking Texan women and children had gathered in a crowd. Some of his men were trying to make time with the pretty girls. They had mutton-chop sleeves and pink ribbons in their strawberry-blond hair, and they were patriotically resisting, flinching away from smiles and snarling "greaser."

A photographer was setting up outside the Alamo. He had come with the Europeans. The Flying Circus came out, with Beria and Carranza, and they posed, guns brandished, moustaches fierce. The photographer insisted Zapata take his place in the centre. As he held still, a grin plastered to his face, he heard Manfred von Richtofen snarling in German to his brother. Zapata knew enough of the hawking and spitting language to realize that the Baron was complaining again, about the heat, the food, the filth and the smell. The Baron did what his Kaiser told him, but he disliked fighting alongside peasants.

Zapata could almost feel the German or Russian bullet in his back. And he had always had the footprint on his face. Once, it had been the landowners and Porfirio Diaz wearing the boot. Now, it was his fellow peasant, Pancho Villa, and Diaz's pet killer, Victoriano Huerta, and the crowned heads Villa and Huerta chose for allies.

The flashpowder exploded, and Zapata felt his heart jump. The Baron made it a point of honour not to be fazed, but Zapata knew a true soldier couldn't hear an explosion and see a puff of smoke without trembling in his boots. A soldier without fear was a dangerous fool.

The ensemble broke up, and began discussing the situation in smaller groups, in too many languages.

A motorcycle rode into the square in a cloud of dust, and Sean Mallory dismounted. A man of many useful skills, Mallory had been running messages behind the front as it advanced across Texas, taking the occasional time out to dynamite a bridge or a bank building. Zapata liked Mallory. He was another peasant, the British bookmark outlining his twinkling eyes. He didn't fuss with salutes or protocol, just handed over a despatch wrapped in oiled skin. It had a wax seal Zapata recognized.

"From Villa?"

Mallory nodded, and he realized this was important news. How the rider knew what it was he carried was beyond Zapata, but the man was blessed with the luck of the Irish and a touch of the shining.

Zapata tore the packet open, and read quickly. He had always been a good reader, although the American papers called him an illiterate. As he read, his peasant heart filled with joyous blood.

Beria was talking to him, giving advice that sounded like an order. "... next, you should strike for Austin ..."

Zapata shook his head, and folded up the despatch from Villa. Beria looked at him with a cold fury.

"We are at peace," Zapata said. "The frontier is here, under our feet, stretching from San Diego to Corpus Christi. We are in a no-man's land. Behind us is the Republic of Mexico, ahead ..." he tried to fit the new name into his mouth "... the United Socialist States of America."

He handed the paper to Beria, to whom it was useless.

"Villa has met with representatives of Mr. Debs, and North America is at peace. Your advice, Lavrenti, is no longer required. You must extend our thanks to your Tsar. By the way, General Huerta has been removed from his position, and I am now commander-in-chief of the armies of the Republic."

The Germans were listening too. Carranza looked as if he

had just bitten a chili pepper. Mallory was grinning broadly.

"Should your crowned heads still want someone to invade the USSA for them and overthrow its revolution, I suggest they try Canada. Gentlemen, good day and ... *adios*."

Zepata walked away from the men in uniforms, past the canvas-winged airplanes and the battered tin lizzie. He would join Mallory in the *cantina*, and drink until he was insensible, then he would find a woman. It was a good day to be a peasant.

Wednesday, July 4, 1917. The White House, Washington, D.C.

The Red Special had arrived in the city over a week ago, bringing Debs, Hill, Sinclair and the other leading lights of the revolution. Sam had been in the crowd waiting at the station, a sergeant again in the militia of the Socialist Vanguard. The morning after the train had drawn up, and the fighting men of the SV had taken up positions around the city, linking up with the local Workers' Committee. Debs had walked up Capitol Hill, where both houses of Congress were still furiously in session, even if many Progressives and Republicans and not a few Democrats were absent from their accustomed seats. The Speaker of the House of Representatives, at gunpoint, gave Debs the floor, and the new President, unanimously elected by the workers' committees, announced that the USSA was a reality.

Of course, Debs had put off the "storming of the White House" for six days, just to hit today's date. There was no

sense in future generations having two holidays so close together. One big revolution, one big holiday! In the last days, the message had finally sunk in. Until Debs' arrival, the conventional life of Washington had been continuing as normal, even if a few of the legislators' wives were offended to be called "comrade" by streetcar conductors. When Debs addressed a meeting at City Hall, where the capital's sole battle had been fought a few days earlier between the militia and a handful of reactionaries, he had made one of his more inspirational speeches, concluding with "We shall now proceed to construct the socialist order." Sam's ears still rang with the applause.

Now, the last palace of the robber barons was to fall. The masses were assembled, curiously quiet and orderly, on the White House lawn. Debs was there, and John Reed, Joe Hill, Upton Sinclair, Frank Norris, Clarence Darrow, Jack London. Big Bill Haywood and Theodore Dreiser were in California, but were there in spirit. Ernest Hemingway, now an officer in the SM, was leading Sam's detachment, his red sash around his waist like a cummerbund. The summer sun bore down on them all.

Sam held his rifle with a sweaty grip. This was not like France. This meant something. The only casualty had been a railroadman killed by a comrade's dropped shotgun.

Reed was on the platform, reminiscing about Kane's inauguration, repeating the old wives' tale about Lincoln crying.

Then, it was time.

Sam knew this was a ceremony, not a battle. The robber

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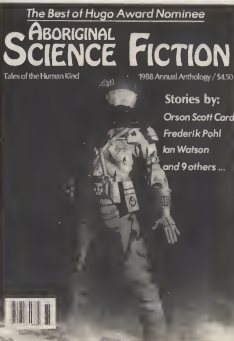
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barons were long fled. Noah Cross was already in Switzerland, railing against the man who had "to be smuggled into America in a sealed container like a bacillus." Many had preserved a portion of their fortunes in jewels or overseas holdings, and would henceforth be ornaments to the social seasons of London, Paris or Berlin. The crowned heads were still bogged down in their squabble, but that would not last. After all, they had a common cause in their enmity for the USSA. Even Kaiser Billy would throw in with the Tsar and the King to condemn the new regime across the Atlantic.

For the first time in living memory, this country felt like the New World again. Someone was running up the new flag on the White House lawn. Stars, stripes, hammer and scythe.

The lone figure strolled up to the White House, rifle in his hands. Sam knew Eddie Bartlett would be grinning, but with a genuine good humour this time. That was fit. This was a country for Eddie Bartlett and Jimmie Higgins now, not for John D. Rockefeller and Edward D. Stotesbury.

Hemingway gave the order, and the detachment marched across the lawn to support Eddie. Many of the unit were survivors of the bloody holocaust of France.

The doors were open, and Eddie pushed through, Sam and the men running after them, yelling. Their shouts echoed around the foyer. Outside, the masses were cheering again. Men and women flooded into the White House, and found it empty and abandoned. A few servants and guards surrendered immediately, and were absorbed instantly into the crowd.

Eddie was lifted high on his comrades' shoulders and was laughing, tears rolling down his face. The kid had done good, Sam thought. The crowds made way for Debs and the other leaders, and they began to make speeches no one could hear for the applause. Debs got a few sentences into his prepared address, then smiled and tore up his notes. He threw his hat in the air with the rest. Someone had found the White House's bootleg hoard and, although temperance was one of the planks of the SV, bottles were being passed around and cracked open.

Hemingway got close and tapped his shoulder, serious amid the gaiety.

"Sam," he said, "cut out a few of the sober men, and search the place. I won't feel secure until that's done."

Sam understood. There might still be die-hards lurking, waiting for a chance to put a bullet into Debs or Eddie or Reed or one of the others.

With a couple of teetotaling Quakers, Sam started at the kitchens and worked his way up. The White House had been abandoned in a hurry, and many offices were scattered with papers strewn at random. A few waste bins were full of ashes, and there were unfaded rectangles on the walls where paintings had been taken down. They found many of the paintings stacked at random on a landing, forgotten in the rush.

The President's family had left for Canada months earlier. Nothing had been heard from Kane on Capitol Hill since the Red Special hit town. Debs had had to accept a formal surrender from Vice President Bryan.

It was strange to prowl through these high-ceilinged rooms, to skim over the left-behind furniture, pictures, statues, files, clothes, fixtures, books, manuscripts. Presumably, Debs would move in within the month, and this would remain the centre of government. But to Sam, this was a haunted house, long-abandoned, inhabited only by unhealthy memories. The robber barons were gone, he told himself. Things had changed.

Opening a door into a drawing room, Sam saw a woman. She was hatless and in a plain dress, but there was a buckskin-fringed gunbelt around her hips, and she had a hogleg Colt in her hand. He recognized her, but she had forgotten him.

Following Annie's eyeline, he saw the broken man, hunched and huddled as he squatted on a low stool, staring

at a bauble in his hands. Annie had her gun on the former president, Charles Foster Kane.

"So this was what we were fighting," he said.

Kane looked up, eyes empty, and mumbled something none of them caught.

"Hell," the sharpshooter said, putting her gun away, "there'll be a job for Charlie somewhere. He could be a gardener, or an usher at the opera house ..." She looked at Sam more closely. "The Pink, right?"

He nodded. A smile spread on her face.

"Funny how things come around," she said.

They left Kane, and were surrounded by the noise of the celebrating crowd. They were singing now, one-half "The Internationale," the other half "Polly-Wolly-Doodle." Grizzled old railmen were sobbing like children. John Reed and Ernest Hemingway were embracing like lovers. Eugene Debs was clinking bottles with a one-eyed militiaman.

Militia Sergeant Sam D. Hammett had done his duty. "Long live the revolution," he shouted, "long live the USSA!"

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Interview

The David Wingrove Interview

By Stan Nicholls

David Wingrove believes science fiction has lost its way. "There's some inner, central drive to the genre which has disappeared," he says.

"As far as the current poor state of British sf is concerned, my theory is that this goes back to the First World War, and what happened socially in this country. It has to do with our technophobia. As Victorians, we were the machine lovers *par excellence*, but World War One came along and those machines that had brought prosperity and whatever it was the Empire represented suddenly turned on us. Instead of being railways and steam boats that conducted trade, they became tanks, submarines, and airplanes that bombed us."

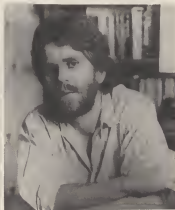
The American experience was different. "They didn't suffer the hideous things that happened to us in World War One, or World War Two. They were never invaded and they were never bombed, apart from Pearl Harbor. But even that was an abstract thing; they were outraged by it, but they weren't actually affected by it."

"So if you look at America after the First World War, you'll find Edison was the national hero. The inventor was the person every schoolboy wanted to be. And that continued into the science-fiction field, with Gernsback, and the wireless and electronics publications which turned into science-fiction magazines. Over here it couldn't happen because we were suspicious of technology. Technology turns on you. It's the Frankenstein tradition, isn't it?"

"I'm totally in agreement with Greg Benford here, and this business that the English think they write the good stuff and the Americans the crass commercial stuff. That's a false attitude, and a lot of people over here have it. There's too much of the mandarin, to use Cyril Connolly's phrase, about our writers; too much emphasis upon style and surface, upon if you like the superficialities of

novel writing, and not so much on that ideational centre to the field."

Wingrove, into the eighth year of researching and writing his seven-volume *Chung Kuo* series, feels that the science-fiction establishment in Britain almost encourages people to think small. "It bugs me that I was told time and again, 'You can't write a big novel;' then 'You can't write that big a novel;' then 'You can't write a seven-volume novel.' It was such an outrageous idea. I suppose the point I'm trying to make is that people judge it as if you have some commercial motive, that you've set it up as a scam. My jaw drops at that. I think it comes down to people not wanting you to be ambitious or successful. Or anything that's positive. That's weird."



David Wingrove

But surely this attitude isn't exclusive to British sf? Many readers feel the American field is equally bland these days. "I think they are catching it. In America it's a different process to here. You have Clarion and Milford, for example, which nowadays you buy your way into. At least you can buy your way into them, I'll say that is a positive thing. But you buy your way into one of these writing groups, and they'll tell you how to go about it, what the rules are. A lot of good writers can survive that, but the bulk of sf writers are beaten out of shape by it—or they are beaten into one shape, and that shape is these days very 'literary.' I'm not knocking the need to have stronger characters, stronger plots and so on, but if it's at the expense of the

gosh-wow element of science fiction, then I'm not for it."

"I would readily admit to anybody that in the final chapter of *Trillion-Year Spree* (written with Brian Aldiss) there was no way I got a hold on the modern genre. I did not understand all the different drives and different ways people were writing science fiction. I couldn't conceptualize it. But I tried to say what was there, and commented on the fact that we have lost control. And you don't get any credit for that."

"Something that underlined this, and assured me I wasn't being paranoid about the whole thing, was that the review reaction to the first book in my series, *The Middle Kingdom*, was so universally of one kind in this country. In America—and these are people who haven't got some little handhold in the genre or a corner to fight—the reviews were of a different opinion. They were positive. They told readers what ideas the novel contained. Over here there was nothing like that. There was no discussion. Either those American reviewers were all out of their skulls, and so dumb they didn't understand what the books are about, or they were applying reasonable critical criteria. That confirmed to me what was going on; that it wasn't a question of me having written a bad book. If I'd written a bad book I would be interested in somebody telling me in what way."

So the genre is at a crucial point at the moment? "I think so. You enter the science-fiction field because you are absolutely enthused by it. The reason I helped Brian with *Trillion-Year Spree* was because I still had that enthusiasm. I want to write science fiction more than anything else, but I don't want to be told I can only write this kind of narrow, thin, circumscribed stuff. I want to write things which generate ideas and new conceptions of growth in people. That sort of material simply isn't being written over here. It is a crucial time for sf. Then again you could say any point in the last fifteen years has been a crucial time. Something essential is missing."

"If you go back to those old copies of *Worlds of If* and *Galaxy* and so on, they are wonderfully readable still. They are full of ideas exploding like fireworks. There is no magazine in the world you

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can read now which does the same thing. I don't know if that has to do with the editing, whether it has to do with the fact that we haven't got a Horace Gold or a Fred Pohl; even a Campbell, crass as he was. But there are so many factors involved that you cannot say this is the only reason for it. The field has grown so large that maybe these things are happening because it's too big now. There's nobody there to conceptualize it and draw it all in."

Ha thinks one of the problems with the science in Britain is that we are all living in the shadow of *New Worlds* magazine. "New Worlds helped promote a very literary, paler form of science fiction. I've got no objection to that; my objection is to it being the only thing on offer. It's almost religious, and anything outside of it has become unorthodox. It's U and non-U. You see an element of that creeping in and that's dangerous. It was never there before."

"When Moorcock was doing *New Worlds* he was kicking against things, like the crassness of the American magazines. Now there's not much difference between *Interzone* and *Asimov's*. There's still a fair difference between *Interzone* and *Fantasy & Science Fiction*, but that's only because of the fantasy element, which I think is the most readable part of the magazine. So I'm opposed to this sense of orthodoxy. It's not *Interzone* I'm against; I'm against *Interzone* being establishment. I want it to be a vital magazine actually fighting against something. Nothing in the middle ground exists any more, and when the periphery becomes the centre then you really have got to worry."

Does he therefore see the planned resurrection of *New Worlds* as a regressive step? "It depends how it's done. I thought that the (1970s) book form of *New Worlds* was a re-generation of the title. The thing was dying on its feet during the last dozen issues of the magazine. When it went into paperback format a lot of sparky stuff appeared in it. So I'm not against all that. It's just this thing that there isn't a centre ground, and there isn't the enthusiasm for pure science fiction. You may say 'What's pure science fiction?' But we know what we're talking about. Ian Watson's the closest in this country, I suppose, to have done that in the recent past, with novels like *The Embedding* and *The Jonah Kit*, and even he's no longer doing it. The novels of his early years were so fascinating because he seemed to be playing on that pure tradition."

"I'm out of my time; I'm a humanist. I want to talk about the people. In a way it goes right back to Heinlein. Because he wasn't interested in the ideas, he was interested in how the ideas touched people. That's what makes a good science-fiction story."

"In *Chung Kuo*, I'm obviously interested in building this great world, but once it's there I'm more concerned about what it's like to live in than showing off the technological wonders. That's something you get slated for over here. On the one hand they want you to deal with the people, but on the other they want you to have all the science-fictional aspects. I've been criticized for not being extrapolative enough. But the series talks about over-population, it talks about the problems of huge cities, and about having a different cultural matrix. If that isn't science-fiction extrapolation I don't know what is."

Chung Kuo presents a future dominated by the Chinese, and his interest in their culture goes back to childhood. "During the sixth form I did Far-Eastern history, and was set an essay on the Opium Wars, which got me reading on the subject. I was still reading about it six months later. That's where the real fascination with China came in. When I started to work on the short story which was the starting point for *Chung Kuo*, I thought, 'Well, I've got this interest in China, I'll use it.'"

"I was always indignant about the way the West opened up China. I hated the brash arrogance of it. You'd read these historical accounts and they would portray the Chinese as being feeble-minded. Whereas the truth was we were the people who took the opium in there and made them that. We were the original pushers. We started the whole business which is ruining parts of our world now. I wanted to reverse that view. But it really started as just coloration, a bit of texture; I thought it would be a nice backdrop."

"That original story was like a detective thriller with science-fictional trappings. It got longer and longer, until I had a 65,000-word novel. And in some ways it was broken-backed; it had all these ideas about a Chinese world which I hadn't worked out — I'd just thrown them in."

"I'd written more than a dozen (unpublished) novels before I started this, and thought I'd got down all the different ways of writing. I thought I knew how to structure a book. But it was like writing my first novel again. It was so full of ideas and so uncoordinated and unstructured. But it was the best thing I'd ever written. At which point I decided to research this thing, find out the whys, whats, and ifs. What would the world be like if the Chinese took over? What kind of structures would there be? How do I throw a line forward from now to then? I spent ages working out all these things, and researching and rewriting."

"At that stage I thought it was going to be a fairly tight little book. But I was not just dealing with the story of my characters; I had to tell their life stories."

And I had to write about this great big society which was undergoing a transformation from a *yang* culture — heavily structured, masculine, hierarchical — to something which was softer and had more balance. The *yang* element and the *yin* element — male and female, dark and light — had to be married, balanced. Once I realized that, I thought, 'Christ, this is a big idea.'"

In book two of the series, *The Broken Wheel*, Wingrove presents a kind of dystopia. What is it about the Chinese character that makes him think they would create such a society? "They do it every two or three hundred years. In a way I've extrapolated nothing. I'm describing a situation that has happened five or six times, historically. You see these periods of stasis, where the whole machina of government clogs up. The Emperor is at a distance from his people, sheltered by a filter of ministers and eunuchs, and the guy goes to his Summer palaces but he travels down an enclosed walkway for 400 miles, literally — they used to build these things right across the country, so that nobody could see the Emperor. Then again the Emperor couldn't see the people either. This sort of thing happened historically in China time and time again. So I wanted to encapsulate that process."

"And it's not a process that just happened there. We haven't noticed it in the West because our development has been much slower, and we had religion, which the Chinese never had. The Chinese dealt with religion in a very different way. They say there are three paths to one goal, so whether you're a Buddhist, a Taoist, or a Confucian doesn't really matter. Most Chinese are all three. They use whatever's convenient. So when Christianity came along it was a total irrelevance to Chinese life. They have this attitude that if you're a Christian you're no longer human in a way."

But he does not think China is going through a dystopian phase at the moment. "They've been through that. Tiananmen Square was like a blip on the screen — a particularly horrifying one, but when you look at China's history, not an unexpected one. The Chinese have no Pandora's Box myth; they can always put the lid back. If they don't like something all they have to do is crush it. But I don't think this current situation will last longer than the old boys who are in charge now. As soon as they're gone, the younger generation, who didn't grow up under such austere, horrible conditions, will recognize the need to bring China into the 21st Century. Then we'll see such radical change that everything which went before will seem mundane."

"My feeling about the Chinese is that they are every bit as hardworking and clever as the Japanese. They have al-

ways been capable of putting together large numbers of people in very organized ways to do big things. One example is the megacity they built north of Hong Kong, ready for when they take over. They did this in the space of five years, employing engineering feats the Americans would be proud of. They were the first people to have a civil service, and to understand it had to be a meritocracy. It took us 1500 years to catch up with that concept."

There has been a certain amount of criticism of the series, partly centering on the amount paid for it, and partly on the way it was promoted. "I suppose some of it was informed, but a lot of it wasn't," Wingrove says. "I expected some kind of flak because it's a big project for a large sum of money. If you want facts, it's £17,000 a book. Which is well paid for a science-fiction novel, but considering it was a huge project it's not an enormous amount. It's easily earned out. But that element of it was understandable I suppose; there was a certain amount of controversy to be generated from it."

"What dismayed me more was the whole business of 'You're pushing science fiction back into the forties; you're writing the sort of stuff we've left far behind us.' But I can't see much progression in the kind of writing we're getting now. There really aren't that many outrageous ideas or experimental novels about. There are exceptions to that, but generally there's not a great deal of originality in the field these days. So when you come along with a fairly big idea, you'd think people would at least pay attention, and maybe find it interesting, instead of shooting it down before it has a chance to get to its feet. At the time I was intensely irritated by this. But now I tend to think that if you're going to do something different, or break moulds, you're got to expect that reaction."

There was a bit of an uproar because he wrote his own press releases. "The press releases were meant for the media. We were trying to get across to radio stations and people in the nationals that something fairly big was coming along. As you know, the media doesn't have time to read and look at everything that comes in; they want a summary. We went down and thought about how to get across that barrier. The way we did it was to answer in advance all the crass questions they were likely to ask. The mistake was sending the material out to reviewers, because they just wanted the book. They didn't want some prejudgment on it."

"I'm genuinely of two minds about this. I can see how irritated a reviewer could get when receiving all this stuff, and the implication that you're trying to make their mind up for them. Then you get a review of the publicity material by

somebody like Ken Lake in *Vector*, and you think, 'What's going on here?' It sounded almost like how writing used to be under Stalin — you know, 'You are not permitted to do this kind of thing.' You can't possibly sympathize with that point of view."

Having committed himself to this huge project, will he find time to write anything outside of the series? "Fictionally, no. They're paying me so generously I'm very happy to just sit here and work on the series. It's wonderful to be able to do what you want to do and not have to worry about anything else."

"And if I were to do something else, it would only rob me of the time to work on *Chung Kuo*, and I'm every bit as fascinated by how things will turn out as I hope my readers will ultimately be. If you weren't involved in that way, that wouldn't come across. If I did something else — say I took out six months to write some other kind of science-fiction idea — it would mean having to start all over again when I got back to the series. I've noticed you really cannot do two things at once, you can't switch on and off."

He keeps a tight rein on all the diverse strands. "I structure very heavily, to the point where I know what's in each book and each chapter, and when I get to the stage of writing I know what's in each scene. I know fairly clearly and precisely what's where as far as the plotting's concerned. As far as characters, themes, and various other things are concerned, I keep files. You have to keep tabs, but once you've set up your exoskeleton you've got to try and kick against that. To bring it alive you must try and break away from all the restraints you've set yourself. When you push the structure, sometimes you'll be led off into total dead ends, so you have to have the attitude that you've got to scrap a lot of material. You have to believe there will be more where that came from, and not be miserably about your ideas."

"The other thing is that when you follow something which isn't in the structure, and it works, you've got to be prepared to restructure. You have to be flexible. When I was working on book two I had to go back and rewrite something like a third of it. I found a more interesting way of doing it, which meant the whole thing had to change. I allowed this process to get out of hand in a way, which is why it took twenty-two months to write."

"There are two processes going on. One is very deliberate and conscious, and is if you like the plotter and the schemer in me; the other is the artist — although I tend to think of it more as the barbarian. That second part is like A.E. van Vogt gone mad. Between the two — the sophisticated artisan who wants to

craft a nice model and the barbarian who wants to see what happens when you throw something into the equation — exciting results are produced."

What can he say about his intention to go into publishing himself? "It's to give people the opportunity to take a month off to write a long short story; to take time to write some science fiction, in a way, as it ought to be rather than how it is. It doesn't make any sense at all when you say something like that, but I've got a very clear picture of what I want in my mind. And it's not retrogression back to the fifties, although I like the energy of 1950s sf. I had a degree of sympathy with Kingsley Amis when he said science fiction died in the fifties; however I don't think that's really true because so much of that's excellent happened afterwards. But there was a lot of energy back then and I'd like to recreate that."

"I'd like to reclaim the themes, and re-invent them as metaphors, to give them back the life they had at the dawn of the genre. This is a very difficult brief: to bring in energy, originality, and at the same time the standard of writing we now expect from the field. I don't want to go back to thirties' purple prose, but I want to regenerate the feeling of newness, and do that in short stories. The idea at this stage is to produce an annual anthology."

"There are certain writers whose work attracts me, and I want to draw them in and see what we can do, but I don't want to be exclusive about it because I don't want to form a clique. If we can do it a couple of times, and it works, it might encourage other people."

"I'd pay writers up front to take a month off. In the business of writing you have to buy the time to do it. You've got to make sacrifices. Every hour you sit at the word processor, your pad, or typewriter, has to be bought in a very real economic sense. You can't sit at home for month after month with nobody paying the rent, buying the groceries, or covering the electricity bills. If you can take away that need to fill your time with other things, rather than the business you're good at, then hopefully something will result."

"I'm at the moment trying to finish book three in the series so it's very difficult to get this thing going. Once that's out of the way we'll see what transpires. When we've got the stories in I'm not adverse at that stage to taking it to a commercial publisher. But it's going to be published anyway. I've done editing jobs, I've worked for publishers; I know what's involved. I could do it, although it would be much nicer to interest somebody in the idea. But we'll make the thing first, then it can become a commercial proposition. That's how I did *Chung Kuo*. I made the thing first. The second process was selling it." □

Movie Reviews

Mutant Popcorn

Nick Lowe

Hey, I got my first Christmas on Mars. We'd been time-travelling back and forth among the outer worlds, principally because of a visit to New Zealand — a delightfully ineptly-terraformed human colony, distinguished mainly for its bizarre Polynesian reggae bands and road-movie directors who get hauled off to Hollywood to make somebody's sequel. (It's a well-known cultural quirk that *all* New Zealand films are road movies in one disguise or another, largely because the country itself has been sculpted into one by the connivance of nature and demography: like the half-abandoned set for some vast and incomprehensible Venusian road picture that's lost its script, gone way over budget, and everyone privately knows will never be completed. I can now vouch from experience that the way to do New Zealand definitively is to watch Geoff Murphy's entire back catalogue back-to-back out the video store, then hire a really mean Mitsubishi and drive south till your credits come up. There's no experience like it.)

And on the way back we took a landfall on Mars. Now, I daresay Americans are quite used to the comfortable fiction that what they call "Hawaii" is a bunch of islands somewhere on earth, but we know that's only because they've been deeply interbred with Martians for generations. (The more so the further you go west: there are pockets of California and Oregon whose population is at least 80 percent from Mars.) Well, I can tell you now that no Oldworlder is fooled for one millijiff. The sole preconception the average Brit has about Hawaii is that it's the source of these pant-meltingly funky Sumo wrestlers; and when you get there you see the reason why. It's the *low Martian gravity* that allows the natives to grow to enormous size. As since confirmed by investigation of certain shunned passages in the British Library's suppressed "secret log" of Captain Cook, there is a sodding great spacewarp in the middle of the Pacific, and Mars has been colonized by



the US since the 1840s. How else to explain the colony of top-flight astronomers on a mysterious summit barred to rented vehicles? the uncanny resemblance between the Viking images and certain lava flows on Big Island shot

through a filter? the fact we arrived there *before we set out*? How come *not one car* carries a licence plate found elsewhere on Earth? How come "Waikiki" is

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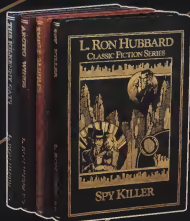
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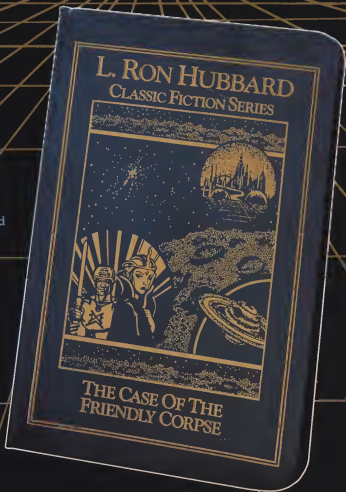
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ASF/7-8

such an obvious transcription error for "Mars City"? I mean, come on, lads: this is the town where you can get a Bloody Mary for 50¢, but only between 6.30 and 7 in the morning. Does that sound like planet Earth to you?

So it was a bit of a disappointment to find Martians watch pretty much the same movies as us earthlings (except that in Hilo beings otherwise indistinguishable from human will actually queue up to see *Three Men and a Little Lady*). The only truly eerie things about filmgoing on Mars are the usual differences that strike between home and away: the regularly over-half-full stalls, the industrial-concentration miasma of popcorn, the complete absence of age-freckled ads for local sports shoe shops and subcontinental takeaways, and the unnerving company of rows of chaperoned eight-year-olds at anything featuring human skulls exploded by small arms fire. (Gloss for transatlantic readers: in an average week, at least one in four of the non-porn movies playing in London will be barred to under-18s, and well over half to under-15s. There is no equivalent to the US "R" category; most films so rated get an "18" in the UK.)

Still, I did see one film on Mars that quite unashamedly proceeded from a brain that is not of this Earth. Tim Burton's *Edward Scissorhands* is one of those pictures that clearly only got made as a result of a chain of preposterous cosmic accident: one of those pet projects, like Demme's threatened Feynman comedy and Lynch's half-forgotten *Ronnie Rocks*, that very gifted and silly filmmakers carry round for years between one hired-hand assignment and another, in the innocent hope that as a result one day somebody will give them millions and millions of studio dollars to share their folly with the world. The fact that Burton — a clever and stylistic person, but plainly a bit of a hatstand — got his pet to run without having filmed from a story of his own before, is presumably due entirely to his uncanny string of success in making winners out of other people's problem children.

And in many ways *Edward* is a very attractive try, a kind of Goreyified *New Adventures of Struwwelpeter*. Edward is a boy built by gothic inventor Vincent Price, who pops it on the eve of finishing the job and leaves his orphan equipped for life with a battery of lethal shears in place of hands. Adopted by Avon lady Dianne Wiest, Edward finds his gift for rococo topiary wins him early friendship and fame in the local community, until his dawning romance with Winona Ryder draws both into a backlash of resentment, violence, and avengeful tragedy. As you'd expect, the whole

thing looks incredible, set in a candy suburbia of sunny pastel monotonies (interiors lovingly furnished with astounding designer kitsch, like something out of the Dimension X pavilion at a fifties World's Fair) around Edward's pocket Gormenghast brooding on the hill. And the very strong cast are at least as good as you'd expect — with the mild exception of Ryder, who's still very sweet, but hasn't much here to work with and seems to be rather losing the advantage of surprise.

All this, of course, is more than just a cut of eccentric whimsey. As only a gastropod with learning difficulties could fail to twig in the early minutes, *Edward's* predicament is a clever and deliberate metaphor for adolescence. In particular, it's about a cluster of very violent teen anguishes not normally accepted in the cosy compass of popular cinema: the feeling of destroying everything you touch, of being somehow crip-



plingly different from the rest of the human race, of the impossibility of ever forming close relationships. Pathetically vulnerable and desperate for love, Edward gets thrust from nowhere to fend for himself in the full emotional hothouse of adolescence, with results that start off cheery but soon grow steadily darker. It's easy to imagine a version of this film that pulled all the punches, anesthetized all its hero's pain, and saccharined out at the end with all living happily. That Burton's film (and Johnny Depp's surprising performance) does none of these, in spite of what must surely have been fierce pressure direct or indirect from the industry, is impressive in itself.

But oh dear, the ending wouldn't look out of place emerging from a horse's bottom. There must have been fistfights or something over the script, because what's finished up has all the signs of an attempt to batter a big genre finale on to a small and very ungenre story. There seems to be a nasty narrative rule emerging in Hollywood storytelling that it's dramatically necessary to slaughter

a character who has presumed to entertain murderous thoughts towards you, even if he's a hopeless berk who's got stranded by some sad accident in a film about the virtues of non-violence. Some years ago the maligned William Peter Blatty made a clever film called *The Ninth Configuration* that exposed the contradictory moral and narrative momentum of film's traditional meeting of violence with violence. I only wish I could think of a picture (unless *Blt3*) that's attempted it since. *Edward's* finale (depressingly like in structure to that of *Ghost*, as well as more than a little indebted to *Batman*) could, I suppose, be charitably defended as a bleakly misanthropic final assertion that society is morally unequipped to accept the disabled. But so much of the surrounding plotting is so wildly nonsensical, even by the generous standards of daftness in the story thus far, that charity here seems a bit stretched. There's loads to enjoy and it's nice it got made at all; but you need to get quite a lot right to make these fairytales work, and wee Timmy is a bit too busy just having fun. At Christmas, on another planet, it can just about pass for a good idea, but there could be problems selling it on terra cialantica in the Easter holidays.

Still, it's amazing what will travel across seemingly impenetrable barriers of space and time. I was fairly gobsmacked to find that the season's surprise foreign-language hit in the US was not *Cyrano de Bergerac* but Ildikó Enyedi's black & white Hungarian fantasy *My Twentieth Century* — a minor festival hit here a couple of years back, but nothing I'd have ever imagined seeing intercontinental release. Presumably Enyedi herself, and the charismatic (German?) star Dorotha Segda, are on planes to Hollywood even as we blink. Certainly this sweet historical farce (about identical twins separated at birth in 1880, one to become a bourgeois sex kitty and the other an anarchist bomber, only to cross paths and converge at the birth of T.A. Edison's miraculous new century of technology and possibility) has a hip millennial wit and demurely ironic innocence in a distantly *Young Einstein* vein. But the wonderfully unabashed east-Euro tempo and style make its successful export a heartening, not to say mind-boggling, achievement.

Even so, I was hardly less jolted to come home and find ads up all over the Piccadilly Line for Steve De Jarnatt's 1988 remnant *Miracle Mile*, for *Miracle Mile* was, of course, the last of the great bomb movies. Despite emanating from a British production company, it's taken three years to get a UK release for this gibbering-paranoia classic, about a nice you-or-me guy who answers a phone ringing in an empty booth at 4 in the

morning in LA to learn that global nuclear apocalypse is fifty minutes away. And already it reads like the document of a vanished epoch. I can't put a date to my own last first-strike nightmare, but I expect it must have been round about the time this movie first came out, which is probably pretty generally typical. (More recently, of course, we've been able to savour the evocative textures of an interesting cluster of all-new armageddon dreams, but those are at best tangential to the film.) Still, it's testimony to the craftsmanship and durability of this modest, starless suspenser that it translates to the nineties with so little loss of momentum.

Particularly risk-taking, but enormously effective, is the unhurried, affectionate setup of characters and milieu, which could happily meander on till the end of the film in a gentle romantic comedy without the audience feeling at all short-changed. Instead, it's as though you're about 30 pages into *When Harry Met Sally*, and suddenly automatic grilles clang down around the windows and steel bands shoot out to clamp the performers in their chairs, and it

turns out we're all in a *horribly different* movie from the one we thought... What's more, despite sporadic feinting threats to dissolve like so many two-horse apocalypse cheapies into a lot of senselessly frenetic runaround, it really does let all hell break loose in the great panic-in-the-streets finale, and still keep stuff in hand for the nailbiter ending. I'm not sure the denouement chosen, which probably stuck at least another year on the overseas release, was the strongest available; but one can see and respect the reasons for resisting alternatives. It's only sad that more of the lovely ensemble, and writer-director De Jarnatt himself, haven't become loads more famous since — though the sublimely weird O-lan Jones does re-emerge to walk off with some killer scenes in *Edward Scissorhands*. In a way, the curiously-timed release has worked out well, because seeing this picture in '91, when it couldn't possibly get made, reminds you vividly that just going out of fashion doesn't make the threat of apocalypse go away. And meanwhile, those jammy aliens have finally got *Drowning by Numbers*... Now that's what I call an inspiring cultural exchange. □

Congratulations to the 1990 Nebula Award Winners

Aboriginal Science Fiction extends its congratulations to the winners of the 1990 Nebula Awards and a special congratulations to Lester del Rey, who was given the Grand Master's Award for his accomplishments in the field as a writer and editor.

The 1990 Nebula Award Winners are:

Best Novel

Ursula K. Le Guin, *Tehanu: The last Book of Earthsea*

Best Novella

Joe Haldeman, "The Hemingway Hoax"

Best Novelette

Ted Chiang, "Tower of Babylon"

Best Short Story

Terry Bisson, "Bears Discover Fire"

A Long Time Ago

Before taking charge at *Aboriginal Science Fiction*, our editor, Charles C. Ryan, was the editor of *Galileo*, a science fiction magazine published in the mid-1970s. During his tenure there, he helped discover a number of new writers who have since gone on to win Nebula and/or Hugo awards, such as Connie Willis, John Kessel, Lewis Shiner, and more.

For a limited time, while copies last, you can purchase a first-edition hardcover copy of *Starry Messenger: The Best of Galileo* for \$10, plus \$1 postage and handling. (Please allow 6-8 weeks for delivery.) If you would like your copy autographed by the editor, please indicate how you would like the note to read.

Starry Messenger: The Best of Galileo (St. Martin's Press, 1979) features 12 stories by the following authors:

Harlan Ellison
Brian Aldiss
Alan Dean Foster
Connie Willis
John Kessel
Kevin O'Donnell Jr.
D.C. Poyer

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Joe L. Hensley
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Book Reviews

Use of Cormorants

John Clute

It is a terrible thing at the end of a long day to leave *Young Bleys* (Tor, \$19.95) and find cormorants. But all things — even this latest instalment in Gordon R. Dickson's *Childe Cycle*, told in the belt-loosened style of his later books — must come to an end, and here we are, back in the future, in the oil-slick winds of 1991, palpating the flensed breasts of the planet for a last drop of milk, according to our wont. It is almost enough to make one start *Young Bleys* all over again. Let us do so.

It is clear, as we begin, that we are expected to remember Bleys Ahrens from earlier volumes of the *Cycle*, and if we've read *The Final Encyclopedia* (1984), as well as the Afterword appended to that volume by Sandra Miesel, we will remember that Bleys — whose name, Miesel tells us, is pronounced blaze, as in the "wrongful blaze" of Milton's Satan — is the great enemy of Hal Mayne, and thus of the evolution of the human race to a higher ethical plane. Dr. Miesel, it should be noted, is good on higher planes. "As the promise of that wondrous future made flesh," she makes clear,

Hal is self-conceived in his fruitful virgin mother's metal womb [i.e. the Final Encyclopedia itself, in orbit around the mother planet] and is coupled to his creative work within her. But Bleys, the solitary outarch, enjoys no such parent or partner's care. Tomorrow's gates are locked against his keyless hand.

Meanwhile, [Hal] is nearly a man; the *childe* is almost a knight. "Darkness within darkness," says the *Tao Te Ching*: "the gate to all mystery." But the pilgrim bold enough to brave rebirth finds the Door into Darkness a passageway to boundless Light.

Sort of thing. In *The Chantry Guild* (1988), Dickson's direct sequel to this Afterword, Hal Mayne fights off Bleys Ahrens's attempts to constrict humanity

to Old Earth, and himself gains access to "the Creative Universe," where "the transient and the Eternal are the same," and there we leave him. It is a point at which the magnificent, extremely tall lad — who has reincarnated Paul Foreman from *The Necromancer* (1962) and Donald Graeme from *The Genetic General* (1960) for breakfast, and for lunch now literally embodies the human urge to grow into the light — might be thought to have become something of a *handful* for a novelist to handle without incense; and it's not perhaps surprising that Dickson has taken a Rip van Winkle plunge back into familiar territory, a deep bath in the psychic 1955 of the *Childe Cycle*'s original conception.

The effect is utterly strange. Young Bleys is eleven and having trouble with his mother, who thinks of him as a toy to be manipulated. Fortunately she is an Exotic — see Sandra Miesel, see numerous cod-epiphanic explanations of the three biological/cultural specializations humanity has branched into: Exotics, Friendlies, and Dorsals — and cannot cause him bodily harm. A lover has just left her (just as in *Der Rosenkavalier*, the only climax in the book comes before the first page). Bleys watches in secret as she combs her hair, repeating into a mirror she praises she has coached her men to whisper to her. We are then told that she *smells*. "A faint odor, as of musk and perfume mingled, came from her — so light as to make it uncertain whether she had actually touched herself with perfume, or whether it was a natural scent, one that the nostrils of another person could barely catch." It is at this point — we are still on page one — that any reader longing for 1955 should begin to sense that Dickson is on his/her side (though more likely his alone, as those few women who appear in this bildungsroman fare ill), because no writer attempting to create a psychic 1991 could possibly have written those words. If a contemporary novelist had wished to refer to the smell of sex, s/he would almost certainly have *done so*; for the pussyfooting muddle of this passage would have been out of reach: the seemingly unconscious — or dreadfully deliberate — innuendo of "actually touched herself," and the syntactic blurring out of any clear meaning for the word "musk,"

so that after reading the sentence one does not know whether or not one is meant to assume that Bleys's mother has in fact — perfectly unobjectionably — perfumed her privates, before or after having sex. My own guess — based on the total absence from the remaining 455 pages of any reference to sex in any particular, or to any female bodily process or function whatsoever — is that Dickson had no intention of coding the reader in to this level of the human nitty-gritty; and that the elements of coding which inescapably infect the passage derive from his immersion in the pulp periphrases of his youth. In pulp terms, then, we are intended simply to envision, through gauze and rote, a Seductress from *Planet Stories*.

It's more fun than cormorants.

But young Bleys will have none of it. His mother is smothering him, and he has decided to trick her into sending him away — probably to the fundamentalist Christian planet Association where his older brother Dahno, an earlier escapee, now lives. When his mother murmurs into her mirror that she is beautiful, he interrupts her to say she's not. Thus violently roused from her smothering narcissism, she almost kills him with her savage comb, but cannot. Finally she tells him it is time for them to part. The psychodynamics thus activated by this contretemps are obvious enough, and need no gloss. What is interesting about the scene — and symptomatic of the entire huge novel — is what is missing. For we are truly in 1955. Bleys's mother is not beautiful (so we are intended to believe that centuries hence there are no surgical techniques available to alter the "heavy, squarish boning of her face," no biomorphing to grow her a new guise, no cyber cohorts within the skin to remould her). She does not know which one of her lovers is Bleys's father (we are meant to believe that genotyping has died). She is in the heart of her private chambers (but clearly there are no nanotechnologies to guard her and enwrap her and warn her of an intruder). Her comb is a potential weapon (but it is not animate, it has no brain, no fractional shadow of an electronic mind inhabits it, it does not *speak*). We are centuries hence, but the room is electronically deadlier than most of the

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rooms *Young Bley's* readers inhabit today. There is no concourse — no wedding — no interactive hum of information. There are no robots; more important, there are no "partials" (Greg Bear's term) for ambulatory computer-induced partial versions of human minds, hived off to do routine tasks or to represent their originals in otherwise unreachable locations (see review of Michael Swanwick below); and even more important than that, there are no Minds (see likewise Iain M. Banks below), no AIs. Everything in the universe of young Bleys is as it was in 1955. It is just as well for him — and for the book — that the action soon switches to Association, which is backward enough — "even in this day and age," page 233 — for the absence from it of much of the twentieth century to go unnoticed.

And sure enough, we soon feel the warm tug of Dickson's way with a tale close to the soil. The slow growth of a superchild in secret — it is the old secret tale at the heart of the genre — plugs on for hundreds of pages, and it is hard to stop reading. We know it's silly (on the spaceship to Association, Bleys uses a "reading machine" which clearly has no *inbuilt* memory; and his brother, whom we soon meet, manages a multi-world conspiracy, mostly from restaurants, without a personal telephone), but we cannot scant our pleasure in the long slow detailing of Bleys's acceptance by the family he's sent to live amongst. The very monotony of the book holds us like a smell of childhood. It is a long summer afternoon. It is long before all of this 1991 stuff. Nothing happens, and nothing happens.

Bleys grows up on the farm, nearly hits a woman who dares touch him, eventually learns how to dominate his brother's conspiratorial network of Others — men (and very occasionally women) of mixed breed (apparently the cultural splitting of the human enterprise into Dorsai et cetera is meant to have a genetic base) who will eventually fuel the conflict with Hal (Miesel calls him Christ) Mayne to determine the future; but in *Young Bleys* these Others are still no more than a fun congeries of small-town thugs, the sort of thick-eared dupes Murray Leinster used to create for cadets to flummox. So our only problem is when we remember Sandra Miesel, when we recollect that Bleys's experiences on Association are intended to demonstrate to us the inevitability of his conclusion that humanity must retreat to Old Earth, and that as a consequence he must be thought of as a kind of Satan. The last pages of *Young Bleys* replay almost exactly the opening pages of *The Final Encyclopedia*; but they only diminish it. In the original book, Hal Mayne's protectors are destroyed by an intruder from

the dark abyssal bosom of the race; in 1955, they're knocked off by the Fonx in a hairshirt.

Notes: the ungainly breeze of amplitude blowing through the larger books of Iain M. Banks about the Culture cannot, one might think, do more than rattle his short stories into shambles and assertion; and indeed not all of the tales collected in *The State of the Art* (Orbit, £12.95) do really work very well. While "Odd Attachment" loudly and neatly turns a traditional alien - point - of-view - of- descending - spaceship tale into an extremely funny dirty joke, "Cleaning Up" goesos Clifford Simak to no avail. "A Gift from the Culture" is from *Interzone*, and much benefits from the larger context of this book and of the novels which surround it; another Culture tale, "Descendant," is perfectly competent, but does not o'erleap its medium by as much as a smidgen.

But the title story — it appeared first as a book in the USA in 1988 — only grows with familiarity. As may be fairly widely known by now, it is set on Earth in 1977, where a Culture General Contact Unit (i.e. a huge Mind-run spaceship) has settled into an information-gathering orbit. Diziet Sma — whose consciousness also mediates the pincer-plot of *Use of Weapons* (1990) — is asked by the ship to attend upon and in a sense interview a Contact agent who has gone native; and it is generally through her consciousness that we trace his progress/regress into a full identification with 1977 humanity. Given the state of the planet — conveyed through some "Swiftian" perusals of human economics, ecology, war-fever, utterly unbelievable cruelty, and so forth — she thinks he is close to insanity, though perhaps not quite gone. It is certainly the case that his slow dismantling of his Culture-being reads with all the horrific melancholy of some account of the self-mutilation of a hermit. To become human in 1977 seems, to Diziet, deeply fetishistic. There are countervailing voices, however, and the novella ends in a sustained peripatetic debate about humanity and the Culture, which is never so clearly defined as here in its post-scarcity freedom, its Golden-Rule equilibriums, its gaiety.

In the end, one is very glad Diziet Sma gets away.

Stations of the Tide (1991) by Michael Swanwick may be the most urgent novel that will be published this year; *Griffin's Egg* (Legend Novellas; Century, \$9.99), because it is short (barely 100 pages), and because it is set on the Moon a few decades hence, is a tour de force of a milder pace. It is, however, a remarkable novella. There is a sense in its pages that the Moon — after the long rust and debacle of NASA — has been recovered

for sf as a subject matter; *Griffin's Egg* recaptures the Moon from history (NASA's real year being that of Kennedy's death) and gives it back to us. Much happens there. Large corporations, which display what British Conservatives like to call a "robust" attitude towards matters of ecology, spread across the "dead" terrain. The viewpoint character goes walkabout now and then to escape the sense that the old tragedy of Earth is being re-enacted on her satellite. There are complex human interactions, and partials — see above — who prefigure the Ariel-AIs of *Stations of the Tide*. Sex. Strife. War upon the mother planet. An intense complexity of response. Several models for understanding the human animal are adduced, as it were off-hand. They intersect; they section the beast; they point to what we may become. The Moon — in Vachel Lindsay's epigraph — is a griffin's egg. So is each human being in the book. With superb concision, *Griffin's Egg* hints at some terrible great beauty burning. Us, Swanwick deposes. But there is nothing simple about the vision.

Cormorants will hatch us.

Razor Cuts and Death by Marshmallow Paul J. McAuley

Watch out for him, I said of K.W. Jeter in *Interzone* 30, while reviewing *Death Arms* and *In the Land of the Dead* — the first a bleak sf road movie, the second a kind of horror novel, more noir suspense than splatterpunk. Jeter is a writer who resists categorization in genres obsessed with categorization, and there is a steely consistency in the worldview through which his fiction is filtered. It produces novels which are densely textured, bleak but with a saving note of grace, and edged with razor-sharp sarcasms generated by a refusal to accept genre tropes, to take shared assumptions at face value. And here are two more of his books, one SF, the other a horror novel. Kind of.

One of the primary metaphors of sf is the big artifact, and exploration of the big artifact, in which the hero learns its secret history and so is able to manipulate it towards a new order, is one of the primary plots. Both metaphor and plot tend towards romanticism, for constructed landscapes have an attrac-

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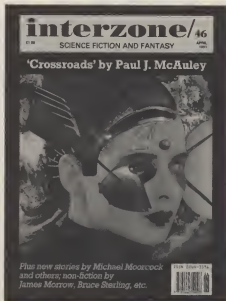
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tively simple nonentropic pre-Chaos neatness. Like the watch in the infamous metaphor about evolution, their existence implies a maker: they are texts that can be parsed backwards to a specific beginning. But while Jeter's *Farewell Horizontal* (Grafton, £3.50) utilizes both big artifact and secret history trope riffs, it is defiantly anti-romantic.

The artifact is a tower called the Cylinder, so big its size is unclear: clouds hide its foundation; although we assume it is rooted to the Earth, it is orbited by comets; and there has been a war, and so much history has been forgotten that only vague legends of its construction remain. The core of the Cylinder is rumoured to be inhabited by violently anarchic Dead Centres, and warring tribes roam over its skin. In between, drone workers maintain a static civilization so dominated by the remains of information technology that information has become the standard on which the economy is based.

Axxtar has abandoned the safe drudgery of the horizontal world inside the Cylinder for the chance at winning fame and fortune as a graffix artist, working for the tribes who rove the vertical world of the Cylinder's surface. Operating at the margins of a hardcore capitalist ethos, Axxtar is scratching a living from minor commissions and selling shots of ethereal gas angels copulating when he lands a prime assignment to redesign the military iconography of one of the Cylinder's most powerful tribes. But a pirate transmission obscenely scrambles Axxtar's designs and, chased by the tribe, he falls from the Cylinder, is rescued by a gas angel and deposited on the unpopulated far-side. His only way back, if he can survive its hostile inhabitants and the megassassin the tribe has sent after him, is through the Cylinder's core. On which journey he gets wisdom, and learns the true nature of his world and the power struggle in which he has become involved as the fall guy.

It is this familiar scenario — the voyage of discovery in which the hero strips the world of its masks — that Jeter subverts with broad force and razor blades. The spare, vertical, technodense landscape is invested with gritty reality almost hallucinatory in its realization, wrought with pinpoint concern for detail from contemporary icons (Hell's Angels, cable TV, information technology). So much concern for realism, in fact, that Jeter's intellect begins to cut to ribbons the tropes *Farewell Horizontal* has grudgingly assimilated. In an economy based on information and hardwired with information technology, there is no room for hackers who might (if this were an unreconstructed romantic sf novel) have intentionally stripped the world's

masks, and so won it. Someone (a sort of magic guide) tells Axxtar:

"That hacking bullshit goes back a long way — not just before the War, but before the Cylinder itself. You gotta ask yourself, who did it benefit to have people believing that restricted-access data files and operating systems could be broken into by some bright thirteen-year-old with a dime-store terminal and a fast hand on the keyboard? ... So anyway, you don't get some magic key to everybody's deepest secrets. You'll just have to do with what you know already."

This is this, says Jeter, a difficult position to take in any kind of SF, even when it is so corrosively antimimetic as this. It says something about the strength of Jeter's worldbuilding that despite his sometimes too visible struggle against the inevitability of sf tropes, the centre somehow holds.

The same concern for detail and the same world-weary cynicism are evident in Jeter's horror novels, which until now (with the honourable exception of *In the Land of the Living*, from small press publisher Morrigan) have been unavailable in Britain. But now Pan promises to publish them all, and the first, *Soul Eater* (Pan, £3.99), is to hand, with a state-of-the-art cover by Dave McKean.

Jeter's concern for verisimilitude does not undermine his horror fiction as it threatens to undermine his SF, because the landscape of horror fiction is, necessarily, apparently mimetic. Its surface is contiguous of the surface of our own world: tension is generated by the reader's anticipation that in the mimetic surface lie trapdoors. In this way, *Soul Eater* uses the rhetoric of horror to strip bare the emotional battlefield of divorce and child custody within the familiar territory of Californian suburbia.

Braemar's ex-wife lies brain-dead in a post-stroke coma, yet because of her previous involvement with a strange and sinister cult her soul roams free, able to possess her blood relations (the female as predator/betrayer occurs again and again in Jeter's fiction). Through her daughter, she seeks to revenge herself on Braemar, and she also possesses her sister, who has become reduced to a junkie incestuously abused by their brother, also an ex-member of the cult. Braemar is a self-lacerating hero, hardly daring to believe that he can win, fighting only because he must. He first tries to flee with his daughter, who each night tries to kill him, before he realizes (upon the advice of the one-time cult leader, who inhabits the plot mostly to download essential information) that he must confront and destroy his ex-wife. And as with the heroes in most of Jeter's fiction he wins

through because, in the world view of Jeter's fictions, just because you're paranoid doesn't mean they aren't out to get you. There's only one scene of bloodletting in *Soul Eater*, and that in a subplot, but it is so intensely horrific that the build-up towards it, and the act itself, gives a luminous resonance to this claustrophobic psychological thriller. Highly recommended.

Equally claustrophobic is Angus McAllister's *The Cannongate Strangler* (Dog & Bone, £5), a claustrophobia generated by the Edinburgh setting of wynds and stairs and closes and narrow smokey pubs. Ostensibly the jailhouse confession of Henry Cunningham, the eponymous serial killer, *The Cannongate Strangler* is a twisty narrative dealing with the duality and malleability of personality, a knowing homage to Stevenson's *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*, whose territory it shares. Cunningham claims to be a respectable lawyer, Edward Middleton, who found himself in telepathic contact with the strangler. At first attempting to interfere with the strangler's activities after he's turned away by the disbelieving police, Middleton finds himself drawn ever deeper into an ambivalent relationship. Despite turning upon a rather conventional plot device, the heightened evocation of Edinburgh's gothic atmosphere lends an eerie sense of otherness, and the resolution manages a final unsettling twist that's pleasing in its intelligent manipulation of narrative frames.

Among other things, it's lack of a sense of place that fatally weakens Teresa Plowright's *Dreams of an Unseen Planet* (Grafton, £3.99). In a recent interview, Jane Johnson (now sf & fantasy fiction editor at Collins, whose paperback imprint Grafton is) asked for some "hateful reviews" in *Interzone*. She wanted some blood spilled in an educational kind of way. Well, one reason that reviews of downright bad books rarely appear here is because of well-honed avoidance behaviours. I have a rule that in order to be nasty to a book, I have to read the thing first, and I'd rather not read rubbish (as opposed to trash, in John Waters's sense of the word) — hey, I have a life to lead, and besides it might be catching. But having ploughed through the rapid romanticism of *Dreams of an Unseen Planet*, I think I've earned the right to say that this is possibly the worst sf novel I've ever read, and I'm sure you'll all agree that it takes a special kind of untalent to earn that distinction.

What makes it so bad is that Ms. Plowright has patently not bothered to think through anything at all: the result is an unfocused farrago of clichés which gives the reader the unsettling sensa-

tion of slowly drowning in semi-molten marshmallow. The setting is a colony on a seemingly lifeless alien planet, in which the birthrate has dropped to close to zero and contact to Earth has been cut off by mysterious interference. The heroine perceives, because she is the heroine, that the planet is somehow alive (a scenario so strangely reminiscent of Lem's *Solaris* that the blurb writer believes the colony to be in orbit), its consciousness awakened by the colonists and its influence magnified by water, which is why things suspended in water — fish, hydroponic crops, embryos — fail to thrive. Since people are mostly water, it's difficult to see why the workings of their own cells aren't influenced, but neither internal consistency nor rationalization are Ms. Plowright's forte.

So the heroine wanders around the colony (a shopping mall furnished with third-hand *Star Trek* props), wringing her hands and *suffering* because she's sensitive and linked to the planet (this takes up more than half of the book), and at last the colonists pack her off on a spaceship with another woman, ostensibly to see if Earth still exists, but in fact to get rid of her. Despite a recent plague, all is well with Earth; the heroine's friend goes down to the surface (the heroine stays aboard the shuttle, vaguely troubled by an undefined premonition) and the vaccine she is given kills her. "It seems that we're different in some basic, imperceptible way from the people that (sic) stayed on Earth." It's that *seems* which gives the game away. It fails to redeem the sf setting in the same way that a detective arresting someone because she "seems" to be guilty would fail to redeem a crime novel. So the heroine returns to the colony, no wiser than before (although she takes it upon herself to set up an elaborate lie to prevent the colonists returning to Earth for eleven years (don't ask why)), and finds the problem has been solved in her absence. Which makes one wonder why (a) she was the focus of the book in the first place, and (b) just *how* the problem was solved, because apart from the discovery that a "special glass" encourages plants to grow, no explanations, explicit or implicit, are forthcoming.

Now, I don't mind skilful sleight-of-hand, or moving the focus away from the workings of the plot, or even sf novels which are not plot-driven: but I do expect something more than evaporation of a problem which has caused handwringing on the part of the heroine for 350-odd pages. Having set up the situation, which could have had something interesting to say about the kind of Western *hubris* that believes a landscape is simply a *tabula rasa* waiting to be exploited, Ms. Plowright should have worked it through. It seems that she couldn't be bothered; that all she wanted to do was

wallow in the self-centred sensitivity of her heroine.

Well, the hell with her. I'd rather write about good books. I'd like to write that Keith Brooke's *Keepers of the Peace* (Gollancz, £13.95) is a good book, because he's a young British sf writer and there are still too few of them about. But although *Keepers of the Peace* is ambitious, it doesn't live up to the promise of that ambition.

It's the story of the corruption by war of Jed Brindle, a naive farmboy from an orbital colony, and his attempt to win back his own self during a mission gone wrong. The war is a guerrilla campaign conducted by space colonists in a balkanized United States (a nice inversion of the usual scenario); the corruption is symbolized by hardwiring which enables soldiers to completely control their bodies.

Character change is something that's usually addressed by hard sf in terms of narrative drive: The Man Who Learned Better is a plot device of a thousand sf novels from *The Stars My Destination* downwards. Crudely put, in Learning Better, the hero earns the magic McGuffin or manages to control his unique dowsing power in time to sew up the resolution. It's commendably ambitious of Brooke to focus on character evolution as something other than plot device (all Jed will save is his soul: to reject his soldierhood is positively anti-survival), but unfortunately he finesses the problem by never directly showing the transition from farmboy to ruthless killing machine. Instead, he interleaves straightforward narration about a failed assassination attempt that leaves the hero leading a party through enemy territory, with cut-ups and excerpts and secondhand accounts about Jed's training and military service. These tell us that Jed is handsome, brave and strong, but we're never shown this by Jed's actions and reactions. And after we're told twice that he's a hunky kind of guy, and a terrific luv, we begin to suspect that Mr. Brooke doesn't know *how* to show us.

Well, you can tell the reader anything; the difficulty is in making the reader believe it. Because Mr Brooke fails to make us believe in Jed's prelapsarian honest-to-goodness wholesomeness, we can't become engaged in his struggle to regain himself. All we learn is that war is hell, but we already know that. It's a pity, because Brooke writes cool uncluttered prose (even if it is fake American tough-guy), informed by an urgency that smoothly lubricates the fast-moving plot. We can hope that next time he'll have something new he can tell us, and a way of telling it.

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Springtime for Oedipus

Wendy Bradley

There has been a paradigm shift in the treatment of "Red Indians" — Native Americans — since the days of the Hollywood western. They are no longer "savages" existing like America itself to be "civilized" by European invaders. They are, instead, heroes of the postmodern world, whole and centred and in touch with the earth and emerging from their retreat to lead humanity into — well, whatever the author wants the future to be like. I am indebted to the American Embassy Library for confirming that Richard Nixon did indeed, for example, legalize the use of the so-called magic mushroom peyote for members of the Native American Church, an Interesting Fact revealed by Allen Steele in *Clarke County, Space* (Legend £14.99).

The novel has a Native American hero who is the sheriff of the space colony of the title and is a Navajo, which means he comes complete with a need to retreat to a hogan he has built on one of the agricultural areas where he takes peyote and has authentically Navajo-sounding spiritual experiences familiar from Le Guin's *Always Coming Home*. Unfortunately his, er, heroic physical endowments are also referred to more than once, which makes his name — Bighorn — particularly risible and reminds me unpleasantly of the element of racism which is as present in the whole/centred/ideal view of other cultures as in the ignorant/savage/demonic construct.

The Heinlein analogy comes easily when talking about this book, not only from this particular qualem but from pleasanter similarities: we have a space colony built by private enterprise and looking for independence, heroes with a need to prove themselves in hands-on face-to-face combat, and of course feisty, horny women hurling themselves on the hero at every turn. You will guess the identity of the computer hacker too quickly to need clues from me, and although the "Mafia moll pursued by unstoppable killer" subplot is predictable, the "Church of the Living Elvis" subplot is entirely charming.

More Mafiosi in Charles de Lint's *Greenmantle* (Pan Books, £7.99 pb, and £14.99 hardback). This one is curious; de Lint writes like an angel but even an archangel couldn't make me

believe in this plot. A doublecrossed Mafia soldato hides out in the Canadian outback next door to a former sixties flowerchild who has grown up to be the tough mom of a fey but independent young girl. As soon as the flowerchild's drug-running old man turns up with rape and pillage on his mind you think how *handy* it will turn out to be for them to have befriended their tough neighbour, but, no, there is more. The woods are infested with a "horned mystery" who is Pan and the Green Man and all those other mythological mysteries and he, too, befriends the girl and her neighbour. So there is a fast-paced Mafia hitman plot and a slow, magical mystical plot cut together and I don't think anyone could have carried that juxtaposition off. De Lint gets damn close, but in the end I feel about his Canada the way Monty Python's Arthur felt about Camelot: "On second thoughts let's not go ... it is a silly place."

If I told you that *The Sword of Samurai Cat* by Mark E. Rogers (Tor Books, \$7.95) was the funniest book in the entire history of the universe and Guildford, (a) you wouldn't believe me and (b) Tor Books would probably put it on their advertising and I'd have to sue them, so it's a good thing I'm not likely to say it, even if it's very nearly true. If you have seen *Temple of Doom* you should persevere till page 99 even if you don't understand any of the other (very American) references up till then; but who could not like a book that actually uses the line, "You dirty cat; you killed my brother"? The Cat and his homicidal nephew are guaranteed to make you fall off the sofa laughing at least twice and the Hollywood Ninja (wear white by night, black by day) is a must.

City of Truth by James Morrow (Legend, £9.99) is a novella in hardback. Here a critic has a tough manual job, deconstructing works of fiction in the most literal sense, taking a hammer to statues, incinerating poetry, melting *Casablanca* in a vat of chemi-

cals — because they are lies. In the city of Veritas people are brain-burned at adolescence so that they are physically incapable of telling a lie. Ah, Plato! This is a nice conceit that leads to some witty touches — the hero eats "murdered cow sandwich, wilted hearts of lettuce, high-cholesterol fries — a quite reasonable \$5.99" at the "No Great Shakes" restaurant. Yet he learns that his son is suffering from an incurable disease and the only possibility is a "miracle," harnessing the boy's own immune system by convincing him that he will not die. A lie can save his son so the hero, Sperry, sets out to overcome his conditioning.

The mechanism used by the Resistance to train resisters to lie is also amusing but then the Tiny Tim plot teeters on the edge between touching and mawkish and whether or not it falls over will be a personal judgment. This is a novella par excellence: too much for a short story, too slight for a novel, well written, funny.

Frederik Pohl's *Outnumbering the Dead* (Legend, £9.99) is also, as one would expect from an author of his stature, exemplary, but in this case the novella would possibly also bear rewriting as a novel. There is an italic passage at the head of each chapter which moves the plot along a notch ready for the next scene, thus compressing it into novella form, but also acting as a witty "chorus" to the story itself in the Ancient Greek theatrical manner. What we have here is a world of immortals, remaining ever youthful after a small operation in the second trimester of pregnancy and supported by lukewarm fusion power and space exploration providing endless resources of everything for everyone. The hero, however, is one of those rarities for whom the operation was not a success and he is therefore mortal in a world of immortals. He is also an actor, and his story is set against the production of a wonderfully crass translation of Sophocles' *Oedipus* into pantomime rhyming couplets and song and dance that gave me considerable glee:

Chorus: Ecce Creon, crowned with laurels

Oedipus: He's going to say what's wrong's our morals.

(Enter Creon)

Creon: D'accord, but I've still worse to follow

It's not me speaking. It's Apollo.

I would love to see a full length version, not because the novella is imperfect but simply because its perfection leaves me wanting more — and if Pohl were to write the remainder of his verse *Oedipus* it sounds to me as if it would be right up there for delicious awfulness with *Springtime for Hitler*. □

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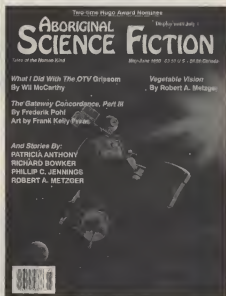


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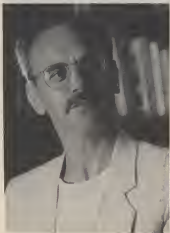
Visiting Aborigines

Greg Egan has been appearing in both *Interzone* and *Isaac Asimov's Science Fiction Magazine* with increas-



Paul J. McAuley

ing frequency of late. His recent stories in *Interzone* include the superb "Learning to Be Me," issue 37, "Axiomatic,"



Garry Kilworth

issue 41, and "Blood Sisters," issue 44; a recent piece in *Asimov's* was "The Safe

Deposit Box," September 1990. Readers in Britain and the USA are fast learning that he's one of the finest sf short-story



Eric Brown

writers around. Born in 1961, he lives in Perth, Australia.

Paul J. McAuley was born in 1955 and now lives near St. Andrews, Scotland. His most recent book is the short-story collection *The King of the Hill*, and his major new sf novel *Eternal Light* is forthcoming from the same publisher,



Nicola Griffith

Gollancz, in June (384 pp., £14.95).

The Gollancz catalogue describes it as "a radical hard science fiction novel which fuses cutting-edge cosmological speculation about the nature and fate of intelligent life in the universe with detailed depiction of an interstellar society undergoing enormous cultural

and political change... *Eternal Light* is huge in scope, breathtaking in its ideas, and packed with character, atmosphere and incident. To read it is to rediscover science fiction's sense of wonder." Wow.

Garry Kilworth is a well-known English writer of sf and fantasy who currently lives in Hong Kong. His many books include the novels *Hunter's Moon* (1988) and *Midnight's Sun* (1990). His last story in *Interzone* was "Dep'elgan'er" (issue 21), and we're pleased to welcome him back to our pages after a longish absence.

Eric Brown was born in 1960 and lives in Yorkshire, England. His debut collection, *The Time-Lapsed Man and Other Stories* (Pan Books, 1990), was recently reissued in an attractive



Kim Newman

hardcover edition by Drunken Dragon Press, Birmingham (£13.50). The publisher tells us that UK public-library orders of that edition have been encouragingly numerous — which goes to prove that it is still possible to make a reputation on sf short stories alone.

Eric's last stories in *Interzone* were "The Pharaean Effect," issue 41, and "Piloting," issue 44, and we expect there will be more from him soon.

Nicola Griffith wrote "Mirrors and Burnstone," *Interzone* 25, and "Down

the Path of the Sun," *Interzone* 34. An erstwhile resident of Hull, England, she moved to America over a year ago, and is continuing to write copiously. Her fantasy stories "The Other" and "The Voyage South" appear in the GW Books Warhammer anthologies *Ignorant Armies* (1989) and *Red Thirst* (1990). She is presently working on a novel.

Kim Newman is the author of *The Night Mayor* (1989) and *Bad Dreams* (1990), both published in Britain by Simon & Schuster (UK). Writing as "Jack Yeovil," he has also produced *Drachenfels* (1989), *Demon Download* (1990), *Krokodil Tears* (1991), and the forthcoming *Comeback Tour and Beasts in Velvet* (all GW Books).

He appears regularly on Channel 4 television as a film reviewer, and has also written the critical books *Nightmare Movies* (1988) and *Wild West Movies* (1990), both published in the UK by Bloomsbury. Kim's last solo short story in *Interzone* was the well-received "The Original Dr. Shade," issue 36.

Eugene Byrne, Kim's longtime friend and collaborator, is deputy editor of *Venue* magazine in Bristol, England. Eugene's first two published short stories appeared in the anthology *Route*



Eugene Byrne

666 (ed. David Pringle, GW Books, 1990) under the pseudonym "Myles Burnham." Like Kim, he is a regular contributor to *Interzone's* new sister magazine, *MILLION: The Magazine of Popular Fiction*. "Ten Days That Shook

the World" is a prequel to Newman & Byrne's earlier *Interzone* story "In the Air," issue 43, which dealt with the adventures of Buddy Holly, Jack Kerouac, and Howard Hughes in a 1950s communist America under the dictatorship of Al Capone. □

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Viewpoint



Cyberpunk in the Nineties

Bruce Sterling

This is my sixth and last column for *Interzone*, as I promised a year ago when I began this series. I've enjoyed doing these pieces, and would like to thank the energetic editor and indulgent readership of *Interzone*. A special thanks to those who contributed terms and comments for "The SF Workshop Lexicon," which remains an ongoing project, and will show up again someday, probably in embarrassing company. Those readers who had enough smarts and gumption to buy the *Signal* catalog (see column one in issue 37) have been well rewarded, I trust.

In this final column, I would like to talk frankly about "cyberpunk" — not cyberpunk the synonym for computer criminal, but Cyberpunk the literary movement.

Years ago, in the chill winter of 1985 (we used to have chilly winters then, back before the ozone gave out), an article appeared in *Interzone* 14 called "The New Science Fiction," by Vincent Omniaveritas. "The New Science Fiction" was the first manifesto of "the cyberpunk movement." The article was an analysis of the sf genre's history and principles; the word "cyberpunk" did not appear in it at all. "The New SF" appeared pseudonymously in a British sf quarterly whose tiny circulation did not restrain its vaulting ambitions. To the joy of dozens, it had recently graduated to full-colour covers. A lovely spot for a manifesto.

Let's compare this humble advent to the recent article, "Confessions of an Ex-Cyberpunk," by my friend and colleague Mr. Lewis Shiner. This piece is yet another honest attempt by Someone Who Was There to declare cyberpunk dead. Shiner's article appeared on Jan. 7, 1991, in the editorial page of *The New York Times*.

Again an apt venue, one supposes,

but illustrative of the paradoxical hazards of "movements." An avalanche, started with a shout and a shove somewhere up at the timberline, cannot be stopped again with one's hands, even with an audience of millions of mundanes.

"Cyberpunk," before it acquired its handy label and its sinister rep, was a generous, open-handed effort, very street-level and anarchic, with a do-it-yourself attitude, an ethos it shared with garage-band '70s punk music. Cyberpunk's one-page propaganda organ, *Cheap Truth*, was given away free to anyone who asked for it. *Cheap Truth* was never copyrighted; photocopy "piracy" was actively encouraged.

Cheap Truth's contributors were always pseudonymous, an earnest egalitarian attempt to avoid any personality cultism or cliquishness. *Cheap Truth* deliberately mocked established "genre gurus" and urged every soul within earshot to boot up a word processor and join the cause. *CT*'s ingenuous standards for sf were simply that sf should be "good" and "alive" and "readable." But when put in practice, these supposed qualities were something else again. The fog of battle obscured a great deal at the time.

Cheap Truth had rather mixed successes. We had a laudable grasp of the basics: for instance, that sf writers ought to work a lot harder and knock it off with the worn-out bullsh*t if they expected to earn any real respect. Most folks agreed that this was a fine prescription — for somebody else. In sf it has always been fatally easy to shrug off such truisms to dwell on the trivialities of sf as a career: the daily grind in the Old Bologny Factory. Snappy cyberpunk slogans like "imaginative concentration" and "technological literacy" were met with much the same indifference. Alas, if preaching gospel was enough to reform the genre, the earth would surely have quaked when Aldiss and Knight espoused much the same ideals in 1956.

Sf's struggle for quality was indeed old news, except to *Cheap Truth*, whose writers were simply too young and parochial to have caught on. But the cultural terrain had changed, and that made a lot of difference. Honest "technological literacy" in the '50s was exhilarating, but disquieting — but in the high-tech '80s, "technological literacy"

meant outright ecstasy and dread. Cyberpunk was weird, which obscured the basic simplicity of its theory and practice.

When "cyberpunk writers" began to attract real notoriety, the idea of cyberpunk principles, open and available to anyone, was lost in the murk. Cyberpunk was an instant Cult, probably the very definition of a cult in modern sf. Even generational contemporaries, who sympathized with much *Cheap Truth* rhetoric, came to distrust the cult itself — simply because Cyberpunks had become "genre gurus" themselves.

It takes shockingly little, really, to become a genre guru. Basically, it's as easy as turning over in bed. It's questionable whether one gains much by the effort. Preach your fool head off, but who trusts gurus anyway? *Cheap Truth* never did! All in all, it took about three years to thoroughly hoist the Movement on its own petard. *Cheap Truth* was killed off in 1986.

I would like to think that this should be a lesson to somebody out there. I very much doubt it, though.

Rucker, Shiner, Sterling, Shirley, and Gibson — the Movement's most fearsome "gurus," ear-tagged yet again in Shiner's worthy article, in front of *The N.Y. Times* bemused millions — are "cyberpunks" for good and all. Other cyberpunks, such as the six other worthy contributors to *Mirrorshades: The Cyberpunk Anthology*, may be able to come to their own terms with the beast, more or less. But the dreaded C-word will surely be chiselled into our five tombstones. Public disavowals are useless, very likely worse than useless. Even the most sweeping changes in our philosophy of writing, perhaps weird midlife-crisis conversions to Islam or Santería, could not erase the tattoo.

Seen from this perspective, "cyberpunk" simply means "anything cyberpunks write." And that covers a lot of ground. I've always had a weakness for historical fantasies, myself, and Shiner writes mainstream novels and mysteries. Shirley writes horror. Rucker was last seen somewhere inside the Hollow Earth. William Gibson, shockingly, has been known to write funny short stories. All this means nothing. "Cyber-

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punk" will not be conclusively "dead" until the last of us is shovelled under. Demographics suggest that this is likely to take some time.

Cheap Truth's promulgation of open principles was of dubious use — even when backed by the might of *Interzone*. Perhaps "principles" were simply too foggy and abstract, too arcane and unapproachable, as opposed to easy C-word recognition symbols, like cranial jacks, black-leather jeans and amphetamine addiction. But even now, it may not be too late to offer a concrete example of the genuine cyberpunk *weltschmerz* at work.

Consider *Frankenstein*, by Mary Shelley, a wellspring of science fiction as a genre. In a cyberpunk analysis, *Frankenstein* is a "Humanist" sf. *Frankenstein* promotes the romantic dictum that there are Some Things Man Was Not Meant To Know. There are no mere physical mechanisms for this higher moral law — its workings transcend mortal understanding, it is something akin to divine will. Hubris must meet nemesis; this is simply the nature of our universe. Dr. Frankenstein commits a spine-chilling transgression, an affront against the human soul, and with memorable poetic justice, he is direly punished by his own creation, the Monster.

Now imagine a cyberpunk version of *Frankenstein*. In this imaginary work, the Monster would likely be the well-funded R&D team project of some global corporation. The Monster might well wreak bloody havoc, most likely on random passer-by. But having done so, he would never have been allowed to wander to the North Pole, uttering Byronic profundities. The Monsters of cyberpunk never vanish so conveniently. They are already loose on the streets. They are next to us. Quite likely, we are them. The Monster would have been copyrighted through the new genetics laws, and manufactured worldwide in many thousands. Soon the Monsters would all have lousy night jobs mopping up at fast-food restaurants.

In the moral universe of cyberpunk, we already know Things We Were Not Meant To Know. Our grandparents knew these things; Robert Oppenheimer at Los Alamos became the Destroyer of Worlds long before we arrived on the scene. In cyberpunk, the idea that there are sacred limits to human action is simply a delusion. There are no sacred boundaries to protect us from ourselves.

Our place in the universe is basically accidental. We are weak and mortal, but it's not the holy will of the gods; it's just the way things happen to be at the moment. And this is radically unsatisfactory; not because we direly miss the shelter of the Deity, but because, looked at objectively, the vale of human suffering is basically a dump. The human con-

dition can be changed, and it will be changed, and is changing, the only real questions are how, and to what end.

This "anti-humanist" conviction in cyberpunk is not simply some literary stunt to outrage the bourgeoisie; this is an objective fact about culture in the late twentieth century. Cyberpunk didn't invent this situation; it just reflects it.

Today, it is quite common to see tenured scientists espousing horribly radical ideas: nanotechnology, artificial intelligence, cryonic suspension of the dead, downloading the contents of the brain... Hubristic mania is loose in the halls of academe, where everybody and his sister seems to have a plan to set the cosmos on its ear. Stern moral indignation at the prospect is the weakest of reeds; if there were a devilish drug around that could extend our sacred God-given lifespans by a hundred years, the Pope would be the first in line.

We already live, every day, through the means of outrageous actions with unforeseeable consequences to the whole world. The world population has doubled since 1970; the natural world, which used to surround humankind with its vast Gothic silences, is now something that has to be catalogued and cherished.

We're just not much good any more at refusing things because they don't seem proper. As a society, we can't even manage to turn our backs on abysmal threats like heroin and the hydrogen bomb. As a culture, we love to play with fire, just for the sake of its allure; and if there happens to be money in it, there are no holds barred. Jumpstarting Mary Shelley's corpses is the least of our problems; something much along that line happens in intensive-care wards every day.

Human thought itself, in its unprecedented guisa as computer software, is becoming something to be crystallized, replicated, made a commodity. Even the insides of our brains aren't sacred; on the contrary, the human brain is a primary target of increasingly successful research, ontological and spiritual questions be damned. The idea that, under these circumstances, Human Nature is somehow destined to prevail against the Great Machine, is simply silly; it seems weirdly beside the point. It's as if a rodent philosopher in a lab-cage, about to have his brain bored and wired for the edification of Big Science, were to piously declare that in the end Rodent Nature must triumph.

Anything that can be done to a rat can be done to a human being. And we can do most anything to rats. This is a hard thing to think about, but it's the truth. It won't go away because we cover our eyes.

This is cyberpunk.

This explains, I hope, why standard sci-fi adventure yarns larded up in black leather fail to qualify. Lewis Shiner has simply lost patience with writers who offer dopey shoot-'em-up rack-fodder in sci-fi-rack-fodder drag. "Other writers had turned the form into formula," he complains in *The New York Times*, "the same dead-end thrills we get from video games and blockbuster movies." Shiner's early convictions have scarcely budged so much as a micron — but the stuff most folks call "cyberpunk" no longer reflects his ideals.

In my opinion the derivative piffle is a minor issue. So is the word "cyberpunk." I'm pleased to see that it's increasingly difficult to write a dirt-stupid book, put the word "cyberpunk" on it, and expect it to sell. With the C-word discredited through half-witted overkill, anyone called a "cyberpunk" will have to pull their own weight now. But for those willing to pull weight, it's a big deal. Labels cannot defend their own integrity; but writers can, and good ones do.

There is another general point to make, which I believe is important to any real understanding of the Movement. Cyberpunk, like New Wave before it, was a voice of Bohemia. It came from the underground, from the outside, from the young and energetic and disenfranchised. It came from people who didn't know their own limits, and refused the limits offered them by mere custom and habit.

Not much of it is really Bohemian, and most of Bohemia has little to do with sf, but there was, and is, much to be gained from the meeting of the two. Sf as a genre, even at its most "conventional," is very much a cultural underground. Sf's influence on the greater society outside, like the dubious influence of beatniks, hippies, and punks, is carefully limited. Science fiction, like Bohemia, is a useful place to put a wide variety of people, where their ideas and actions can be examined without the risk of putting those ideas and actions directly into wider practice. Bohemia has served this function since its start in the early Industrial Revolution, and the wisdom of this scheme should be admitted. Most weird ideas are simply weird ideas, and Bohemia in power has rarely been a pretty sight. Jules Verne as a writer of adventure novels is one thing; President Verne, General Verne, or Pope Jules is a much dicier proposition.

Cyberpunk was a voice of Bohemia — Bohemia in the 1980s. The technological changes loose in contemporary society were bound to affect its counterculture. Cyberpunk was the literary incarnation of this phenomenon. And the phenomenon is still growing. Communication technologies in particular are becoming

much less respectable, much more volatile, and increasingly in the hands of people you might not introduce to your grandma.

But today, it must be admitted that the cyberpunks — sf veterans in or near their forties, patiently refining their craft and cashing their royalty checks — are no longer a Bohemian underground. This too is an old story in Bohemia; it is the standard punishment for success. An underground in the light of day is a contradiction in terms. Respectability does not merely beckon; it actively envelops. And in this sense, "cyberpunk" is even dander than Shiner admits.

Time and chance have been kind to the cyberpunks, but they themselves have changed with the years. A core doctrine in Movement theory was "visionary intensity." But it has been some time since any cyberpunk wrote a truly mind-blowing story, something that writhed, heaved, howled, hallucinated, and shattered the furniture. In the latest work of these veterans, we see tighter plotting, better characters, finer prose, much "serious and insightful futurism." But we also see much less in the way of spontaneous back-flips and crazed dancing on tables. The settings come closer and closer to the present day, losing the baroque curlicues of unleashed fantasy; the issues at stake become something horribly akin to the standard concerns of middle-aged responsibility. And this may be splendid, but it is not war. This vital aspect of science fiction has been abdicated, and is open for the taking. Cyberpunk is simply not there any more.

But science fiction is still alive, still open and developing. And Bohemia will not go away. Bohemia, like SF, is not a passing fad, although it breeds fads; like sf, Bohemia is old; as old as industrial society, of which both sf and Bohemia are integral parts. Cybernetic Bohemia is not some bizarre advent; when cybernetic Bohemians proclaim that what they are doing is completely new, they innocently delude themselves, merely because they are young.

Cyberpunks write about the ecstasy and hazard of flying cyberspace and Verne wrote about the ecstasy and hazard of *Five Weeks in a Balloon*, but if you take even half a step outside the mire of historical circumstance, you can see that those both serve the same basic social function.

Of course, Verne, a great master, is still in print, while the verdict is out on cyberpunk. And, of course, Verne got the future all wrong, except for a few lucky guesses; but so will cyberpunk. Jules Verne ended up as some kind of beloved rich crank celebrity in the city government of Amiens. Worse things have happened, I suppose.

As cyberpunk's practitioners bask in unsought legitimacy, it becomes harder

to pretend that cyberpunk was something freakish or aberrant; it's easier today to see where it came from, and how it got where it is. Still, it might be thought that allegiance to Jules Verne is a bizarre declaration for a cyberpunk. It might, for instance, be argued that Jules Verne was a nice guy who loved his Mom, while the brutish antihuman cyberpunks advocate drugs, anarchy, brain-plugs, and the destruction of everything sacred.

This objection is bogus. Captain Nemo was a technical anarcho-terrorist. Jules Verne passed out radical pamphlets in 1848 when the streets of Paris were strewn with dead. And yet Jules Verne is considered a Victorian optimist (those who have read him must doubt this) while cyberpunks are often declared nihilists (by those who pick and choose in the canon). Why? It is the tenor of the times, I think.

There is much bleakness in cyberpunk, but it is an honest bleakness. There is ecstasy, but there is also dread. As I sit here, one ear tuned to TV news, I hear the U.S. Senate debating war. And behind those words are cities aflame and crowds lacerated with airborne shrapnel, soldiers convulsed with mustard gas and Sarin.

This generation will have to watch a century of manic waste and carelessness hit home, and we know it. We will be lucky not to suffer greatly from ecological blunders already committed; we will be extremely lucky not to see tens of millions of fellow human beings dying horribly on television as we Westerners sit in our living rooms munching our cheeseburgers. And this is not some weedy Bohemian jeremiad; this is an objective statement about the condition of the world, easily confirmed by anyone with the courage to look at the facts.

These prospects must and should affect our thoughts and expressions and, yes, our actions; and if writers close their eyes to this, they may be entertainers, but they are not fit to call themselves science-fiction writers. And cyberpunks are science-fiction writers — not a "sub-genre" or "cult," but the thing itself. We deserve this title and we should not be deprived of it.

But the '90s will not belong to the cyberpunks. We will be there working, but we are not the Movement, we are not even "us" anymore. The '90s will belong to the coming generation, those who grew up in the '80s. All power, and the best of luck to the '90s underground. I don't know you, but I do know you're out there. Get on your feet, seize the day. Dance on tables. Make it happen, it can be done. I know. I've been there. □

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Song of Bullfrogs, Cry of Geese

By Nicola Griffith

I sat by the side of the road in the afternoon sun and watched the crane fly struggle. A breeze, hot and heavy as a tired dog's breath, coated the web and fly with dust. I shaded my eyes and squinted down the road. Empty. As usual. It was almost two years since I'd seen anything but Jud's truck on Peachtree.

Like last month, and the month before that, and the third day of every month since I'd been out here alone, I squashed the fear that maybe this time he wouldn't come. But he always did come, rolling up in the cloud of dust he'd collected on the twenty-mile drive from Atlanta.

I turned my attention back to the fly. It kept right on struggling. I wondered how it felt, fighting something that didn't resist but just drained the life from it. It would take a long time to die. Like humankind.

The fly had stopped fighting by the time I heard Jud's truck. I didn't get up and brush myself off, he'd be a few minutes yet; sound travels a long way when there's nothing filling the air but bird song.

He had someone with him. I sighed. Usually, Jud would give me a ride back down to the apartment. Looked like I'd have to walk this time: the truck was only a two-seater. It pulled up and Jud and another man, about twenty-eight I'd guess, maybe a couple of years younger than me, swung open their doors.

"How are you, Molly?" He climbed down, economical as always with his movements.

"Same as usual, Jud. Glad to see you." I nodded at the supplies and the huge gasoline drums in the back of the truck. "A day later and the generator would've been sucking air."

He grinned. "You're welcome." His partner walked around the front of the truck. Jud gestured. "This is Henry." Henry nodded. Like Jud, like me, he wore shorts, sneakers and t-shirt.

Jud didn't say why Henry was along for the ride but I could guess: a relapse could hit anybody, anytime, leave you too exhausted even to keep the gas pedal down. I hoped Henry was just Jud's insurance, and not another piece in the chess game he and I played from time to time.

"Stop up if you want a ride," Jud said.

I looked questioningly at Henry.

"I can climb up into the back," he said. I watched him haul himself over the tailgate and hunker down by a case of tuna. Showing off. He'd pay for the exertion later. I shrugged, his problem, and climbed up onto the hot vinyl seat.

Jud handled the truck gently, turning into the apartment complex as carefully as though five hundred people still lived here. The engine noise startled the nuthatches nesting in the postal centre into a flurry of feathers; they perched on the roof and watched us pull up ten yards in, at what had been the clubhouse. I remember when the brass Westwater Terraces sign had been shined up every week: only three years ago. Six months after I'd first moved in people had begun to slow down and die off, and the management had added a few things, like the ramps and generator, to try and keep those who were left. It felt like a lifetime ago. I was the only one still here.

"Tiger lilies are looking good," Jud said. They were, straggling big and busy and orange all around the clubhouse; a feast for birds and bees.

The gasoline drums were lashed down to stop them moving around the flatbed during the drive to Duluth. Henry untied the first and trundled it forward on its casters until it rested by the tailgate.

Inside the clubhouse the dark was hot and moist; a roach whirled when I uncoiled the hose. Back out in the sun I blew through it to clear any other insects, and spat into the dust. I put one end in the first drum.

I always hated the first suck but this time I was lucky and avoided a mouthful of gas. We didn't speak while the drums drained. It was an unseasonable May: over ninety degrees and humid as hell. Just standing was tiring.

"I don't mind walking the rest," I said to Henry.

"No need." He pulled himself back up into the flatbed. More slowly this time. I didn't bother wasting my energy telling him not to use up his trying to impress a woman who was not in the least bit interested.

Jud started up the truck then let it coast the twenty yards down the slope to the apartment building I was using. When he cut the engine, we just sat there, listening to it tick, unwilling to step down and start the hauling around of cases that would leave us aching and tired for a week. Jud and I had worked out a routine long ago: I would go and get the trolley; he would unbolt the tailgate and slide out the ramp; he'd lift cases onto the trolley; I'd trundle them into the apartment. About halfway through we'd stop for iced tea, then swap chores and finish up.

This time, when I went to get the trolley, it was Henry who rattled the bolts on the tailgate and manhandled the ramp down from the flatbed in a squeal of metal. I did my third of the lifting and carrying, but it felt all wrong.

When we were done, and the cans of tuna and tomato and cat food, the sacks of flour and beans, the packets and cases and bottles and tins were all heaped in the middle of the living-room floor and we'd bolted the tailgate back up, I invited them both into the cool apartment for iced tea. We sat. Henry wiped his face with a bandanna and sipped.

"That's good on a dusty throat, Ms. O'Connell."

"Molly."

He nodded acknowledgement. I felt Jud watching, and waited for the inevitable. "Nice place you have here, Molly. Jud tells me you've stayed here on your own for almost three years." It was closer to two since Helen died, but I let that pass. "You ever had any accidents?"

"One or two, nothing I couldn't handle."

"Bet they gave you a scare. Imagine if you broke your leg or something: no phone, nobody for twenty miles around to help. A person could die out here." His tanned face looked earnest, concerned, and his eyes were very blue. I looked at Jud, who shrugged: he hadn't put him up to this.

"I'm safe enough," I said to Henry.

He caught my tone and didn't say anything more right away. He looked around again, searching for a neutral subject, nodded at the computer. "You use that a lot?"

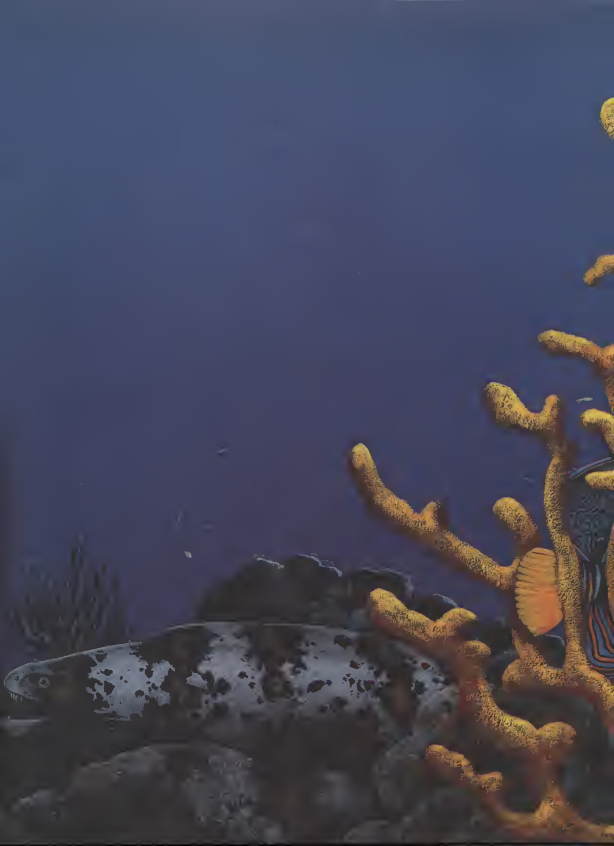
"Yes."

Jud decided to take pity on him. "Molly's writing a book. About how all this happened, and what we know about the disease so far."

"Syndrome," I corrected.

Jud's mouth crooked in a half smile. "See how knowledgeable she is?" He drained his glass, hauled himself off the couch and refilled it in the kitchen. Henry and I did not speak until he got back to the couch.

In the past, Jud had tried everything: teasing me about



being a misanthrope; trying to make me feel guilty about how the city had to waste valuable resources sending me supplies every month; raging at my selfishness. This time he just tilted his head to one side and looked sad.

"We need you, Molly."

I said nothing. We'd been through this before: he thought I might be able to find a way to cure the syndrome; I told him I hadn't much chance of succeeding where a decade of intense research had failed. I didn't blame him for trying — I was probably one of the last immunologists alive — it's just that I didn't think I could do anything to help: I and the world's best had already beaten our heads bloody against that particular brick wall and gotten nowhere. I'd done everything I could, and I'd had a very good reason to try and achieve the impossible.

I had tried everything I knew, followed every avenue of enquiry, run down every lead. Working with support and good health, with international cooperation and resources, I got nowhere: my promising leads led to nothing, my time ran out, and Helen died. What did they think I could achieve now, on my own?

They'd told me, once, that they would take me into Atlanta forcibly. I said: fine, do that, see how far it gets you. Coercion might make me go through the motions, but that's all. Good research demanded commitment. Stalemate. But the way they saw it, I was their only hope, and maybe I would change my mind.

"Why do you stay?" Henry said into the silence.

I shrugged. "I like it here."

"No," Jud said slowly, "you stay because you still like to pretend that the rest of the world is getting on fine, that if you don't see that Atlanta is a ghost town you won't have to believe it, believe any of this is real."

"Maybe you're right," I said lightly, "but I'm still not leaving."

I stood, and went to rinse my glass. If the people of Atlanta wanted to bring me food and precious gasoline in an attempt to keep me alive until I changed my mind, I wasn't going to feel guilty. I wasn't going to change my mind, either. Humanity might be dying, but I saw no reason why we should struggle, just for the sake of struggling, when it would do no good. I am not a crane-fly.

I woke up briefly in the middle of the night to the soft sound of rain and eerie chorus of bullfrogs. Even after two years I still slept curled up on one side of the bed; I still woke expecting to see her silhouette.

My arms and hips ached. I ran a hot bath and soaked for a while, until I got too hot, then went back to bed, where I lay on my back and did *chi kung* breathing. It helped. The song of bullfrogs steadied into a ratchety rhythm. I slept.

When I woke the sky was still red in the east. The bedroom window no longer opened so I padded stiffly through into the living room and slid open the door onto the deck. The air was cool enough for spring. I leaned on my elbows and looked out across the creek; the blind-eyed buildings on the other side of the gully were hidden by white swamp oaks that stretched their narrow trunks up into a sky the same powder blue as a bluebird's wing. To the right, sun gleamed on the lake. Birds sang, too many to identify. A cardinal flashed through the trees.

My world. I didn't want anything else. Jud was partially right: why should I want to live in Atlanta among people as sick as myself, listen to them groan when they woke up in the morning with stiff knees and stomach cramps, watch them walk slowly, like geriatrics, when I had all this? The birds weren't sick; the trees did not droop; every spring there were thousands of tadpoles in the pond. And none of them depended on me, none of them looked at me with hope in their eyes. Here, I was just me, just Molly, part of a world that offered no pain, no impossible challenge.

I went inside, but left the door open to the air and bird song. I moved jerkily, because my hips still hurt, and because I was angry with all those like Jud who wanted to fight and fight to their last breath. Humankind was dying. It didn't take a rocket scientist to figure that out: if women had so little strength that they died after childbirth, then the population would inevitably dwindle. Only five or six generations before humanity reached vanishing point.

I wanted to enjoy what I could of it; I wanted to write this book so that those who were born, if they survived the guilt of their mothers' death, would at least understand their doom. We might not understand the passing of the dinosaurs, but we should understand our own.

After breakfast I put on some Bach harpsichord music and sat down at the keyboard. I pulled up chapter three, full of grim statistics, and looked it over. Not today. I exited, called up Chapter One: How It All Began. I wrote about Helen.

We'd been living here at Westwater Terraces for two months. I remember the brutal heat of the August move. We swore that next time we had to carry desks and packing cases, we'd make sure it was in March, or October. Helen loved it here. I'd get home from the lab after a twenty-minute drive and she'd bring me iced tea and tell me all about how the fish in the lake — she called it the pond, too small for a lake, she said — were growing, or about the turtle she saw on her lunchtime walk and the way a squirrel had filled its mouth with nuts, and she'd ease away all the heat and snarl of a hard day's work and the Mad Max commute. The pond was her inspiration — all those wonderful studies of light and shadow that hang on people's walls — her comfort when a show went badly or a gallery refused to exhibit. I rarely bothered to walk by the pond myself, content to see it through her eyes.

Then she won the competition, and we flew to Bali — for the green and the sealight, she said — on the proceeds. I was grateful for those precious weeks we had in Bali.

When we got home, she was tired. The tiredness got worse. Then she began to hurt, her arms, her knees, her elbows. We assumed it was some kind of flu, and I pampered her for a while. But instead of getting better, she got worse: headaches, nausea, rashes on her face and arms. Moving too fast made her lower body go numb. When I realized she hadn't been around the pond for nine days, I knew she was very sick.

We went to the doctor who had diagnosed my gastroenteritis last year. She suggested Helen had chronic fatigue syndrome. We did some reading. The diagnosis was a blow, and a relief. The syndrome had many names — myalgic encephalomyelitis, chronic fatigue syndrome, chronic Epstein-Barr, post viral fatigue syndrome, chronic immune dysfunction, yuppie flu — but no clear pattern, no cure. Doctors scratched their heads over it, but then said not to worry: it was self-limiting, and there had been no known deaths.

We saw four different doctors, who prescribed everything from amino-acid supplements to antibiotics to breathing and meditation. The uncertain leading the ignorant. Most agreed that she would be well again, somehow, in two or three years.

There were weeks when Helen could not get out of bed, or even feed herself. Then there were weeks when we argued, taking turns to alternately complain that she did too much, or not enough. In one three-month period, we did not make love once. Then Helen found out about a support group, and for a while we felt positive, on top of things.

Then people with CFS began to die.

No one knew why. They just got worse over a period of weeks until they were too weak to breathe. Then others became infected with a variation of the syndrome: the course of the disease was identical, but the process accelerated. Death usually occurred a month or so after the first symptom.

Helen died here, the day the Canada geese came. She was lying on the couch, one hand in mine, the other curled loosely

around Jessica, who was purring by her hip. It was Jessica who heard the geese first. She stopped purring and lifted her head, ears pricked. Then I heard them too, honking to each other as if they owned the world. They arched past, necks straining, wings going like the north wind and white cheeks orangy yellow in the evening sun. Helen tried to sit up to look.

They circled the lake a couple of times before skimming in to land. Their wake was still slapping up against the bridge posts when Helen died. I sat there a long time, holding her hand, glad that she'd heard the geese.

They woke me at dawn the next day, honking and crying to each other through the trees on their way to wherever. I lay and listened to the silence they left behind, realized it would always be silent now: I would never hear Helen breathe beside me again. Jessica mewed and jumped up onto the bed; I stroked her, grateful for her mindless warmth and affection.

I came home tired from the funeral, with that bone-deep weariness that only comes from grief. Or so I thought. It took me almost a week to realize I was sick too.

The disease spread. No one knew the vector, because still no one was sure what the agent was: viral, bacterial, environmental, genetic? The spread was slow. There was plenty of time for planning by local and national bodies. It was around this time that we got the generator at the complex: the management were still thinking in terms of weathering the crisis, persuading occupants that it was safe for them to stay, that even if the city power failed, and the water systems, they'd be fine here.

There's something about the human race: as it slowly died, those that were left became more useful of each other. It seemed that we all became a little kinder, too. Everyone pulled inward, to the big cities where there was food, and power, and sewage systems. I stayed where I was. I figured I'd die soon, anyway, and I had this irrational urge to get to know the pond.

So I stayed, but I didn't die. And gradually it became clear that not everyone did. The latest count indicated that almost five percent of the world's population has survived. The deaths have been slow and inevitable enough that those of us who are still here have been able to train ourselves to do whatever it takes to stay alive. It wasn't so hard to keep things going: when the population is so small, it's surprising how many occupations become redundant. Insurance clerks now work in the power stations; company executives check sewage lines; police officers drive threshing machines. No one works more than four hours a day; we don't have the strength. None of us show any signs of recovering. None but the most foolish still believe we will.

Westwater Ternoes is built around a small lake and creek. Behind the water, to the west, are deciduous woods; other trees on the complex are a mix of conifers and hardwoods: white pine and oak, birch and yellow poplar. The apartment buildings are connected by gravel paths; three white-painted bridges span a rivulet, the creek, and the western end of the lake.

I stood on the bridge over the rivulet, the one Helen and I had always called the Billy Goats Gruff bridge, and called for Jessica. Weeds and sycamore saplings pushed through the gravel path to my left; a dead oak straddled the path further up. Strong sun made the cat food in the dish by my feet smell unpleasantly.

The paint on the bridge was peeling. While I waited, I picked at it and wondered idly why paint always weathered in a pattern resembling a cross-section of epithelial cells, and why the wood always turned silvery grey.

Today I missed Jessica fiercely, missed the warmth of her on my lap and her fur tickling my nose when I tried to read. I hadn't seen her for over a week; sometimes the cat food I put out was eaten, sometimes it wasn't. A warbler landed on the bridge and cocked its head, close enough for me to see the gleam of its bright eye and the fine wrinkles on the joints of

its feet.

I waited longer than usual, but she didn't come. I scrunched over the gravel, feeling annoyed with myself for needing to hold another warm living creature.

Late morning was edging toward noon and the sun was hot on my shoulders. I was thirsty, too, but didn't want to go back to the beige walls of my apartment just yet.

The lake used to have three fountains. One still works, which I regard as a minor miracle. A breeze pulled cool moist air off the surface of the water and through my hair. A frog plopped out of sight, warned of my approach by the vibration of my footsteps. The ripple of its passing disturbed the duckweed and the water lilies. They were open to the light: white, pink, yellow. A bee hummed over the rich yellow anthers and I wondered if any ever got trapped when the lilies closed in the afternoon.

The bridge spanning the thinner, western end of the lake was roofed, a kind of watery gazebo reigned over by spiders. I crossed carefully, watchful of their webs. Helen used to call it running the gauntlet; some of the webs stretched five feet in diameter, and very few were empty.

For me, the bridge was a divide between two worlds. The lake lay on the left, the east, a wide open expanse reflecting the blue sky, rippling with fountain water, surrounded by white pine and yellow iris. The right, the western end, was the pond: green and secret, shrouded by frogbit and lily pads. Stickleback and carp hung in the shadow of cattails and reeds, finning cool water over their scales.

There are almost a dozen ducks here, mallards mostly. And their ducklings. Careful of webs, I leaned on the rail to watch. The one with the right wing sticking up at a painful angle was paddling slowly toward a weeping willow on the left bank. Two of her three ducklings hurried after her. I wondered where the other one was.

It was getting too hot to be out.

Walking around the other side of the lake to get back to the roadway was hard work. The ground sloped steeply and the heat was getting fierce. Storms brought heavy rains in the summer and they were gradually washing away the dirt path, making it unsafe in places. The lake was twenty-five, maybe thirty, feet below me now and to my left, partially screened by the trees and undergrowth on the sloping bank. I heard a peeping noise from the water, just behind a clump of arrowweed. Maybe it was the missing duckling. I stepped near to the edge to get a closer look.

I felt the bucket-size clump of dirt give and slide from under my left foot, but my leg muscles, already tired from the heat and the climb, couldn't adapt to the sudden shift. My body weight dropped to one side with nothing to hold it but bone and ligament. I felt the ligament tear and pop and bones grind together. Then I fell, rolling and sliding down the slope, pain like a hot rock in my stomach.

I crashed into the knobbed bark of an oak; it took the skin off my back and shoulder. I saw the mossy rock clearly just before I hit it.

I woke to heat thick enough to stand on. My mouth was very dry and my cheek hurt. My face was pressed against a tree root. I blinked and tried to sit up. The world swooped sickeningly. This time my face fell on grass. It felt better at first, not so hard.

I was hurt. Concussion at least. Something crawled down my cheek and into my ear. It took me a moment to realize it was a tear; it felt as though someone else was crying, not me. I closed my eyes and began my testing with the left leg, moving it just an inch or so. More tears squeezed out from under my eyelids: the ankle and knee felt as if they were being cut into with a rusty rip saw. I moved my right leg. That was fine. My left arm seemed all in one piece, but moving the right hurt my ribs. I remembered hitting the tree. Probably just bruising.

I opened my eyes. The tree root my face had been resting

on belonged to a smooth-barked birch. If I was sitting up I might be able to think.

I pulled my right leg under me and hauled myself forward with my left elbow. My moon startled a lizard sunning itself behind a leafy clump of purple loosestrife; its belly flashed blue as it skittered through the undergrowth and disappeared into a rotting tree stump. Swept worried over my scraped ribs, stinging. I dragged myself forward again.

I had to lift my head, bring my right elbow down to hip level and twist to roll over onto my back. The pain and the dizziness pulled thick, stringy nausea up over my skin. I thought I was going to pass out. After a moment, I sat up, shuffled back a couple of feet, and leaned against the tree.

The sun shone almost directly into my eyes. The floating sunlotus were open now, damselfishes flashing metallic blues and greens against the rich yellow cups: must be about three o'clock in the afternoon. The air was still and quiet; the frogs silent and the birds sleepy. Fountain water pattered and splashed. I was very thirsty, and the air felt too hot and big in my lungs.

The slope stretched more than twenty feet upward to the path. I could do it if I moved in a zig-zag and used every tree for support, and if I started soon: I was dehydrated and every moment I spent out here in the sun made it worse. The water was about ten feet away, downslope, almost hidden by the tangle of ivy, undergrowth and dead wood.

I edged myself around the bole of the birch and shuffled backwards. The next closest tree was a white pine, about five feet away to the right. I had to stop four times before I got to within touching distance of the pine. I rested against its trunk, panting. The bark was rough and smelled of sun-warmed resin.

It was taking too long: at this rate, the sun would have leached away all my strength before I got even halfway up the slope. I had to risk moving faster. That meant standing up.

I wrapped my arms around the trunk and got myself onto my right knee. The soil was cool and damp on my bare skin. I hauled myself up. The ridged trunk glided in and out of focus.

The next tree was close, only two feet directly upslope. Trying not to think how easy this would be if both legs worked, I took a deep breath and hopped.

The world came crashing down around my head.

I opened my eyes. The pool was slicked with sunset, hot and dark and mysterious. Whirligigs and waterboatmen dimpled the surface. My hand hung in the water. I pulled my face forward a few inches and lapped. Some went up my nose and dribbled down my chin, but enough went into my mouth to swallow a couple of times.

I drank again. It tasted odd, thin and green, but I could feel the good it was doing me. My cheeks felt hot and tight: sunburn. I dipped one side of my face in the water, then the other, then rested my forehead on my arm. Cicadas filled the evening with their chitinous song.

It looked as though I'd been out four hours or more. No point beating myself over the head with my stupidity. The best thing I could do for myself right now was rest, wait for the cool of night, rehydrate. Then think.

Swallows dipped and skimmed over the centre of the lake, drinking in flight, snipping up unwary insects with wing-flicking grace. A cotton mouse nosed her way out from under a pile of leaves and scampered from the shelter of a log to a tree root. She sat up and gnawed on a seed.

I tried not to think about the green peppers ripening on the slope behind my apartment, of the fish in the freezer and fruit in the refrigerator.

About two feet away, a big spider sat on a lily pad, perfectly still but for one of its back legs that hung in the water, twitching. I thought maybe the leg was trapped by something, some hidden weed, but the rhythm was too deliberate; the

spider was using the surface of the water as a drum. A mosquito fish came to investigate. It was tiny, no longer than a fingernail. The spider shot out its front legs and hauled the fish onto the lily pad, into its mouth.

The sunset had turned to purple and I could see stars. Tonight I couldn't recognize any of them; they looked cold and alien. It was cooling rapidly now, but I made no attempt to sit up.

My concussion and exhaustion had prompted a poor decision earlier: heading upslope was not the only way. If I could see a route along the lake shore that was relatively clear of undergrowth, I could walk or crawl around it until I reached the eastern end, where the bank was only four or five feet high. That route would also bring me closer to the roadway that led to the apartment.

I blinked. I'd been asleep: the moon was up. This time, I could dip my hand into the water and bring it to my mouth to drink. I felt less like a wounded animal, more like a thinking, reasoning human being.

All around the pond, bullfrogs were singing. The moon was bright enough to reflect the flutter of trapped wings four feet from where I lay: perfectly still, a frog sat half hidden by cattails, a caddyfin in its mouth. The fly stopped struggling; they only lived a few hours anyway. Born without mouths, they reproduced then died. The frog's eyes glittered cold in the moonlight, watching me. Bullfrogs lived fifteen years.

They sang louder, following each other's lead, altering duration, pitch and rhythm until the water boomed and echoed with their song. Tree frogs buzzed in the higher registers. I felt surrounded and menaced by sound.

Leaves rustled; a shadow eased through the undergrowth behind me. I turned my head slowly, faced two green eyes like headlights. Jessica. A friendly face.

"Jess. Here, baby." She sniffed at my hip. I patted my chest, an invitation for her to snuggle. She froze. "Come on, Jess. Come here, baby." She sniffed my hand, and purred. I laughed. "Yes, you wild thing. It's me." Your friend.

She licked my hand. I lifted it to stroke her. She hissed. "It's me, Jess. Me." She regarded me with cold emerald eyes; in the moonlight, her teeth looked like old ivory.

A small creature, maybe the cotton mouse, scuttled somewhere close to the water. Jessica crouched, bellied forward.

I remembered how she had looked as a seven-week old kitten, the way she had comforted me when Helen died.

Now I saw her as she had always been: a hunter, a wildcat who only licked my hand for the salt. I was not part of her world. I was not any part of anything's world. What I saw when I looked into the eyes of a frog or a mouse was nothing: not fear, not affection, not even contempt.

But I stayed. For Helen. To be part of the world Helen had loved. But staying here did not make me part of Helen's world: Helen was dead. Gone. She'd gone and left me with nothing. No one. It wasn't fair. I didn't want to be alone.

I beat on the dirt with my fist. Why had she died and left me alone? Why? Why Helen?

"Tell me why!"

My scream was raw, too hot, too human for this place. Tears rolled down my cheeks, big tears, big enough to reflect the world a new way. Helen was gone, and the geese were gone; I could stay here forever and she would never come back. I shouldn't be here.

The realization made me feel remote, very calm.

I sat up, ignoring the pain. Getting my t-shirt off was difficult; stretching for the branch two feet away, even worse. The t-shirt was already ripped; it made it easier for me to tear it into strips. I had to try several times before I could tie secure knots around the makeshift splint. Whenever the pain got too much, I rested.

An owl hooted, hunting.

I levered myself up onto knees and elbows, left leg stuck out behind me, stiff in its splint. Pain was just pain.

I dragged myself forward through a monochrome world:

water sleek and black; trumpet honeysuckle leached lithium grey; moonlight lying like pools of mercury on leaves the colour of graphite. Nature, thinking there was no one there to observe, let slide the greens and purples, the honey yellows, and showed her other face: flat, indifferent, anonymous.

I imagined making my pain as impersonal as nature's night face, putting it in a pouch at the small of my back, zipping the pouch shut. Out of sight, out of mind. Somewhere, I knew, there was a place where all the colours and scents of the day waited for morning, and then I would smell iris and pine resin, rich red dirt and green pond scum. And feel the hot orange jags of pain. In the morning.

Right elbow, right knee, left elbow, drag. I focused on the tree forty yards away on the eastern bank, the tree I would use to haul myself upright and up onto the road. Right elbow, right knee, left elbow, drag.

Behind me, I heard the squeak of a small animal. The cotton mouse. Right elbow, right knee, left elbow, drag. The night stretched on.

The tree bark was rough on hands and arms already red raw. No pain until morning. I pulled myself up the incline. The road felt marvellously smooth. I laid my cheek on the asphalt and breathed in the smell of dust and artificial things. Below, the pond glimmered, obsidian. The bullfrogs sang.

My ankle was not broken. I suspected that several ligaments were torn, in my ankle and knee, but distalgesics and support bandages kept me able to manage until, eight days later, I could get around using a heavy branch as a cane. It was hard to hold the cane: the bandages wrapped around my hands and forearms were thick and clumsy.

I limped out to the deck and lowered myself into the hammock: the sky was thick with churning clouds. Usually, I loved watching the sheer power of a storm, the way it could boom and slash and drive over a hot and parched world, cooling and soaking. This time it was different. This time, when the wind tore through the stand of swamp white oak, it seemed to me that it was killing things, flattening them, exposing them: turning the oak leaves silvery side up, ripping off branches, bending the trees almost to breaking point, pressing the grasses flat to the earth and snapping the heads off the marsh marigold. It was brutal.

I swung myself off the hammock. The show could go on without me. Inside, I made myself hot tea, put on Vivaldi — human music to drown the sound of the storm — and retired to the couch with a book, facing away from the glass doors. Let it do what it wanted. I refused to watch the rain swell the creek until it rose high enough to fill the burrows of voles and mice and drown their young.

My ankle and knee improved and I could walk slowly without the cane. I took the bandages off my arms. I did not go near the pond, and walked only on the black artificial surfaces of the road.

Tonight was soft and warm, there was a quarter moon. I walked over the Billy Goats Gruff bridge and listened to the frogs singing around the pond. I turned and walked up to the clubhouse. It took me a while to find the red switch handle. I threw it; the floodlight still worked.

I stood on the road overlooking the pond. Sodium light gleamed greasily on the water next to the silver ripple of the moon. The water looked mysterious, unknowable, like an ancient harbour lit by naphtha flaming in a great bronze bowl.

I looked at it a long time. Helen was not here, she was in my heart. The pond belonged to the past.

I waited by the side of the road for Jud. There were more flowers, and it was just as hot and dusty, but this time there was no spider web, no crane fly. Just the birds singing, and me sitting on my suitcase. Three of Helen's paintings, Song of Bullfrogs

wrapped in our sheets, leaned against the gate.

Jud was on his own. He coasted the truck to a stop and climbed down. I stood. He saw the suitcase.

"This mean what I think it means?"

"Yes."

And that's all we said. He always did know when to speak and when to keep quiet. He helped me push the case and the paintings up into the back, in among all the cans and bottles and sacks I wouldn't be needing.

"You want to drive?" he asked. I shook my head. We climbed up. I put the seatbelt on; my life had suddenly become more precious. Jud noticed, but said nothing. He made a U-turn and we set off back along the road to Atlanta.

I leaned my head against the window and watched the dog violets nodding at the side of the road. I had nearly died out here, believing struggling was for fools and crane flies. Perhaps those who struggled were fools, but they were fools with hope. They were human. Helen was dead. I was not. I was sick, yes, but I still had intelligence, direction, purpose. And time. Something crane flies did not have. If I personally could not finish the research I intended, then those who came after me would. I could teach them what I learned; they would build on it. If I struggled and failed, that was not the end. I am not a crane fly. □

1990 Interzone Story Poll

In its January 1991 issue *Interzone* invited its readers to write in and express their likes and dislikes of the previous year. The poll asked them to name all those stories which had appeared in *Interzone* issues 33 to 42 inclusive which they had most enjoyed, as well as those which they had least enjoyed. (The survey covers just ten issues, as *IZ* only moved to a monthly schedule in April 1990.) Sixty-nine readers took the trouble to respond — not a large sample, but big enough to produce valid results. *IZ* then subtracted all negative mentions from positive ones to arrive at the "scores" you see below. Similar questions were asked about the artwork and non-fiction material. Here are the top five results for the fiction:

- 1) Greg Egan: "Learning to Be Me" (35)
- 2) Greg Egan: "Axiomatic" (30)
- 3) Kim Newman: "The Original Dr. Shade" (27)
- 4) Greg Bear: "Heads" (24)
- 5) Eric Brown: "The Pharaean Effect" (22)

1990 Interzone Artists' Poll

Here are the poll results for the cover artists and illustrators. Again, *IZ* subtracted all negative mentions from positive ones to arrive at the scores:

Covers:

- 1) Ian Miller (#40, *The Difference Engine*) (17)
- 2) Mark Harrison (#33, *Putting Out*) (16)
- 3) Ian Sanderson (#38, *Aldiss* issue) (9)
- 4) David Hardy (#35, first monthly issue) (8)
- 5) Tim White (#39, untitled) (8)

1990 Interzone Non-Fiction

And here are the top twenty-odd non-fiction items which we published in issues 33 to 42 inclusive:

- 1) Bruce Sterling comment columns (27)
- 2) Nick Lowe film reviews (19)
- 3) SF Editors' interview (Stan Nicholls) (18)
- 3) Charles Platt comment columns (18)
- 5) David Langford comment columns (16)

All other non-fiction items scored fewer than three points. So this year's *Interzone* poll winners are Greg Egan for fiction; Ian Miller for cover art; Iain Byers for interior art; and Bruce Sterling for non-fiction. All four successes are well deserved, and we are very pleased for the individuals concerned.

Congratulations!

Hamelin, Nebraska

By Garry Kilworth

Midnight in the small town of Hamelin, Nebraska. Hamelin was one of those places which seemed uniquely American. Just another sleepy hollow where people minded their own business but knew everyone else's just the same. It boasted a doctor, and a lawyer, a school teacher, and a mayor. It also had a nasty stain on its history, like most small towns anywhere, but this had nothing to do with bigotry or hatred of strangers. No Japanese immigrants had been shot to death after the attack on Pearl Harbor. No black citizens had been lynched in the heat of the night. Hamelin's blemish occurred through positive negligence, a turning of the back against responsibility, a washing of the hands.

Hamelin's shame, like most shame, had been born out of fear.

Sheriff Phil Watkins had sent his deputy home and was preparing to lock up his office and make tracks for his own bed, where his wife, Matty, was lying awake, expectantly. Saturday night was their night of the week, since Sunday was a lazy day when neither of them had to rise early. They would have a couple of drinks in bed, watch some television on the portable set propped up by their feet, then they would turn to each other and enjoy safe middle-aged sex.

Hat in hand, Phil Watkins switched off the light, went through the open doorway into the warm night, then turned and locked up, rattling the door to make sure it was secure. He had just removed the key when something struck him on the head, behind the left ear, causing him to reel backwards in intense pain. He blinked rapidly, reaching up to feel a warm sticky wetness in his salt-white hair.

"Hey!" he cried, then looked down to where the object had bounced on the porch boards and saw a heavy rock. It was smeared with his own blood. "What the hell?" He turned, dizzily, just as another rock struck him in the chest, immediately above the heart.

"Jesus!" he wheezed. Then angrily, "Who's out there, goddamit? If that's you Eb Shaffer, I'm..."

He got no further because a third hunk of stone hit him in the mouth, knocking out three teeth. Phil Watkins staggered backwards, drawing his gun, but it was only halfway out of its holster when the rocks began to come at him in numbers, catapulting out of the darkness with considerable force behind them.

Within a few minutes he had been stoned to death.

Three people died that Saturday night. One of them was the mayor and the town's banker, Stan Fredericks, who was first silenced with a piece of fruit.

Stan lived alone and, like most fat men, slept with his mouth wide open to draw in enough oxygen to feed his massive bulk. Someone had plugged that airhole with a large apple. Thus muzzled he was then dragged bodily from his bed and drowned in his own swimming pool. Whoever had killed him left red marks around his neck where presumably they had held his head under water. His body was still on the edge of the pool, belly-up, while his head lolled back in the water.

Soms of the poorer folk from the edge of town, who had at various times been threatened with foreclosure on the mortgages Stan Fredericks held on their homes and small holdings, could not help but feel that perhaps there was some kind of divine punishment involved.

Furthermore, Mayor Fredericks had given the seal of approval to several buildings erected out of public funds, like the new town library, while Banker Fredericks provided loans to the construction companies that were awarded the

contracts. The bank's interest rates were surprisingly high, though Stan Fredericks maintained this was necessary to protect his clients. When the town saw him lying next to his pool barbecue, looking like a bloated suckling pig, the apple still jammed between his jaws, many of them nodded sagely.

The third death, by suffocation, had been administered to Wincy Jacobs, the lady who delivered the mail. She had been smothered by her own rose-scented pillow, the slip and cover of which she tore through with her teeth in her death throes, as she tried to gnaw her way to fresh air. There were down feathers caught in her throat, trapped in her nostrils. Her nails had splinters under them, where she had clawed at the bedhead, presumably blindly trying to find the eyes of her attackers.

What we have here," said Deputy Dan Starkly, in his ponderous fashion, to a gathering of the town's most influential citizens, "is a multi murderer. Hamelin (he pronounced it 'Hammerlen') has a killer who just likes to kill..."

David Werner, the town's young lawyer, interrupted. "We don't know that. We don't know anything at this time. All we know is we've got three dead bodies."

"We know they were killed," snapped someone from behind him. "They didn't just roll over and die."

David turned in his chair and addressed the person directly.

"Yes, we know that much, but no more. Dan talked about a multiple murderer. How do we know it was just one person? It could have been a dozen. Maybe some sort of gang passed through here in the night and is halfway across South Dakota by now? Let's not make emphatic statements, Dan. Let's look at what we've got and then make some assumptions."

"OK, OK," muttered Dan, "let's look at them assumptions. Three violent killings, no weapons involved, 'less you count rocks, apples and pills as weapons. I don't. A gun's a weapon. A knife's a weapon. They don't just come to hand. The instruments used here was just things that came to hand, on the spur of the moment so to speak. Am I right, Dave?" He looked to the lawyer for approval.

"These were opportunist tools, as you say, Dan."

"Fair 'nough. So I assume that what we got here is a person, or persons, unknown, goin' out not looking to murder, but taking it as it comes. Nothin' was stole. There don't seem to be no motive at all. 'Less someone had a special grudge against these three folk, which I personally can't see any connection, we got to worry about the rest of us. When you get down to it, you got to figure Dave's right, that there's more'n one. Have to be a pretty strong man to drag the mayor from his bed, him weighing what he did."

The meeting broke up shortly after that little speech, with Dan warning the townspeople that perhaps the killers would not stop at an odd number, but go on to round it up, maybe into double figures. David Werner was convinced they were looking for a Manson-type gang. The state police had been alerted, of course, but until the town elected a new mayor and sheriff, they had only Dan to look after them. Dan Starkly was a good solid youth who could hit things he aimed at with his thirty-eight, but as an investigative detective he would make a good short-order cook.

Some people, naturally scared, were asking if the FBI could be brought in, but there was an incident in the town's



past, an ugly moment in its near history, of which others were ashamed and had no wish to reveal to outsiders. The FBI were good at uncovering such skeletons, so it was better to keep out the feds until someone absolutely insisted they be involved.

Dan Starkly and David Werner went through the clues together, retraced possible movements of the victims, tried to come up with some conclusions, but by the end of that day were no nearer to any answers. The two men had a beer together, then went home to lock their doors and windows, securely, for the first time in many years.

The next morning they found Eb Shaffer, the town troublemaker, decorated with pointed sticks. He was lying in the middle of the bridge, over the ravine at the back of town, looking like a porcupine. The bridge was one of those preserved-timber affairs, with strengthened supports to take the weight of modern vehicles, of which small towns like Hamelin were proud. It gave them a sense of history.

The sticks bristling from the anatomy of Eb Shaffer weren't much more than twigs, maybe nine inches long at the most. They had been sharpened, it seemed, on sandstone rock. Just like the twigs Eagle scouts fashioned to spear their sausages before cooking them over a campfire. About sixty of these barbecue skewers protruded from the soft parts of Eb's body: his throat, stomach, eyes, and his groin. Dan said the sight made him sick to his stomach, and he kept touching himself unconsciously between the legs. Doc Skimmer remarked that Eb Shaffer must have been attacked somewhere out in the hills, and had staggered, blinded by two of the sharp sticks, to the bridge to die.

"You can see the marks in the dust," he said, pointing with his pipe stem at the weaving tracks. "Poor bastard must've been in terrible pain. My guess is he was wanting the ravine, to kill himself quick, but God bein' a contrary old goat, guided his foot to the bridge."

"Don't cuss," said Dan, looking around the ravine nervously. "We don't know how this is happenin' yet."

"You think God's got a hand in this?" cried Doc Skimmer, contemptuously. "This is more like the work of some crazy people out looking for vengeance. You know what I mean," and he took a puff on his pipe and nodded, his eyes narrowed.

David Werner took this up immediately.

"You're saying ... by Jesus, you may be right. It makes sense. Revenge killings." He turned to Dan Starkly. "Get on to the state police. Check out the family who came through here a while back. The Williamsens, they were called."

Dan's thick-set shoulders dropped, as they always did when he was asked to do something for which he had no taste.

"What'll I tell them? I have to tell them somethin'. They'll want to know why the Williamsens have got a grudge against the town. You know how folks feel about that incident now. If it got into the national papers, why, we'd be sneered at by every son of a bitch from the Atlantic Ocean to the Pacific."

David Werner knew that Dan was right. Most people in the town would not approve of bringing in outside help if it meant opening a cupboard full of bones.

Several years ago a family — no one even knew where they came from — drove into the town. They had three children in the back seat of their truck, all of them sick. Doc Skimmer diagnosed cholera and prepared some beds in the back of his surgery, but being a small town the word spread quickly, and soon a deputation of frightened citizens called on Sheriff Watkins. The sheriff then paid a visit to the doctor, telling him the family, named Williamsen, had to go on to Alliance, where they had a hospital which could deal with such things.

"Hamelin's not equipped for highly infectious diseases, you know that, Doc. Say we're sorry, but there's some supplies been placed by the vehicle, an' they got to go."

Doc had argued that Alliance was nearly two hundred miles away and that the children were very weak. The day was hot and dusty.

"You know what you're asking? I've done what I can for the moment, but they'll dehydrate on the journey."

Sheriff Watkins was no man to do battle with once he had made up his mind on something. Doc Skimmer was not a native of the town, having come there from Lincoln when Doc Albertson died fifteen years previously. He was an outsider who had to be taught his place.

"Get 'em on the road, Doc," said the sheriff firmly, "or start looking for another town, someplace else."

Doc Skimmer was old, and weary — too old to go looking for another practice elsewhere. Watkins would throw him out on his neck and still send the Williamsens to hell.

To his eternal shame, the doctor did as he was told, and had regretted it bitterly ever since. Mr. Williamsen had begged him to let his children stay, to treat them as best he could, but Watkins had dragged the man out to his truck and sat him behind the wheel. The wife had been more aggressive and had attacked both Doc and the Sheriff, first with her small fists, and, when this failed, with her tongue.

"You filthy bastards," she shrieked at them. "If anything happens to my kids I'll come back here and tear your eyes out, I swear. How can you do this? You're supposed to be civilized people. You're nothing but animals."

Doc, knowing this was true, told lies to himself and tried to pacify the woman.

"The children need to get to a hospital. One that can deal with advanced cholera. We can't treat them here. This is a small town, and I'm just a general practitioner. I fix broken bones and give advice for measles, but I'm not equipped to deal with major diseases. Any responsible doctor would do what I'm doing."

Sometimes, now, he woke in the middle of the night, sweating with guilt. He hoped the rest of the town did the same, for two of the children died on the way to Alliance, and though the rest of the family survived and went on to California, those two little souls stayed to haunt the streets of Hamelin, Nebraska, for as long as memories of the dead lived in the minds of men.

"Right," said David Werner, briskly, "this is what we do then. Tonight the whole town stays awake. If the Williamsens are doing this, we'll get them, we'll catch them red-handed ..." he looked significantly at the other two, but they were in no mood for jokes, so he continued, "... we'll catch them ourselves. All right, we did wrong once, but I guess four deaths more than pays for that mistake. I think we're owed, don't you?"

Dan nodded, his eyes glittering and his hand moving automatically to his gun butt. "Damn right," he said. Here was something he knew how to deal with: direct action against a known enemy. "I'll get people organized," he said.

Doc Skimmer remained at the bridge with the body. Looking down on it thoughtfully and shaking his head. Finally he took the pipe out of his mouth, refilled it slowly, tamping the tobacco down with a medical spatula he kept in his pocket for the purpose, and said to the corpse:

"Ain't you glad you're out of it?"

Just before midnight they captured seven of them coming over the bridge. They caught them with a fine mesh net that Eb Shaffer had once used to trap small wild birds.

They were just children — hard-eyed and not at all innocent-looking — but kids just the same. They were all naked, but not the least bit self-conscious about it. When David Werner got them to the town hall under the bright lights, an uncomfortable pricking sensation accompanied his close inspection of them. He felt as if beetles were crawling over his skin, under his shirt, and he kept scratching himself, almost unconsciously.

"Where the hell do they come from?" he whispered to Doc Skimmer.

It was their faces that fascinated the townspeople, all of whom had gathered in the hall at the sounding of the church



bell. Their faces were smooth and shiny, like the pebbles of streams, polished by time and motion over millennia. Their eyes were like flints, glittering from deep sockets. Though small, the creatures — David Werner could think of no other word — were very strong. They now stood in a sullen group, hemmed in by citizens wielding various sharp instruments, shotguns and hunting rifles.

One of the creatures said something in thick guttural accents.

"What kind of language is that?" cried David Werner, the hairs on his neck rising. "Sounds like something that might come out of the Devil's mouth."

Alice Maurer, the librarian, spoke quietly from the back.

"It's German," she said.

"German?" cried Brunnel, the school teacher. "I know German and I can't understand what *he's* saying."

Alice said, "It's Old German, and I think there's a heavy dialect there. I studied Old German at university. I can't catch all of it, but I recognize some of the words."

"How old's old?" asked Doc.

"Maybe twelfth, fourteenth century. Somewhere thereabouts."

David Werner said to Alice, "Can you interpret for us? Can you tell us what that — that creature is saying to us?"

"I caught the gist of it," she replied. "It was something like 'the Pied Piper is gone' or 'dead.' I think it was dead."

There was a stunned silence in the large hall after this remark, as each person in the room, not counting the speaker and those whose words had been translated, stood and pondered on the meaning of this remarkable if incomprehensible piece of information.

Finally, David Werner spoke again.

"What the hell is that supposed to mean?"

"The Pied Piper of Hamelin. He led the children away, into another place, beyond this world."

"I know the goddamn story," cried David Werner. "Jesus Christ, this is Hamelin. Some of the folks here are descendants of settlers who came from the original town in Germany. What I want to know is what the hell it has to do with us, and why these mountain dwarfs are going around killing our people because this guy has died?"

The librarian spoke haltingly to the strange little people, with many repetitions and gestures. Finally there was a terse reply. David Werner could see something in those flinty eyes as the replies were flung back. It was a kind of timelessness, but weary, as if death could not be too soon in coming. These creatures were old, he realized. No, not old, ancient. They had seen the coming and going of centuries. It was this realization that paved the way for the next: he suddenly had an inkling as to what they were — *who* they were — and the thought chilled him through to his heart.

The librarian translated what she had been told.

"The Piper died in his sleep not long ago, though they have a strange way of expressing time, so I have to guess at several days. They miss him, because his music was like a drug to them. They have difficulty in going on without it. All the good feelings they ever had are now gone, replaced by a bitterness as cold and hard as a German winter."

"They say they are the original children of Hamelin, that time in the Piper's land is different from here, which is why they still look young. They will never grow old, but they will eventually die, like the Piper — not in the way we do here. Not for many hundreds of our years."

Again, there was silence. Then someone laughed. Dan Starkly said something like, "Heck, we're in fairyland," and grinned at David Werner, looking for approval.

Doc stopped the sneering.

He said to David Werner, "Do they look human to you?"

The lawyer shook his head. There was something supernatural about these creatures. He could sense it, deep down. It stirred up all the unease of childhood nightmares, brought it to the surface like scum. He had often criticized, when he

watched movies, how easily the victims unquestionably accepted paranormal events. Now he was assailed by the same sort of feelings. There was no need for logic. This came from the part of the brain, perhaps the soul, where reason did not intervene. It came from a warning system that had been in primitive man, in the human race since the beginning of time: an intuitive, instinctive knowledge.

"No."

"Nor me either. They look like something out of hell. This may be funny to some of you, but four of us are dead, and I've a feeling more will follow, even if we lock these creatures away. You can see they're different. You can *smell* they're different. I wouldn't want to bet we've heard the last of this. They're out to get us for some reason. You can see it in their eyes. They hate our goddamn guts."

Someone shouted, "Ask 'em what the hell they want here. This is America. What're they murderin' decent Americans for?"

David Werner nodded to Alice and she went into another long, seemingly tortured, conversation. Someone went out for coffee, beer and cokes while this was going on. Dan Starkly asked Bill Smith to fetch him a burger-no-onions from Gus's place, forgetting that Gus was in the hall with everyone else. A dozen other people ordered sandwiches or burgers, and Gus sent Sly Broder, his short-order cook, with Bill Smith to fill the orders, seeing no reason to turn down a little business.

The drinks and food were in the hall before Alice felt able to pass on her information.

"As far as I can make out, they think this is Hamelin — the original Hamelin, I mean — and they say that over the years they've come to hate us. They say we never went looking for them and we should have paid the Piper in the first place. We broke our promise to him."

"The Piper's land is somewhere out there, in the clouds or the mists they keep telling me. I don't know what that means. It's not in *this* world. I suppose they're trying to tell us that it's in another dimension or something. It's a beautiful land, with green hills, clear streams and rich forests, but without the Piper's music it seems barren. And it's getting colder. The seasons run in millennia. There was never any snow except on the mountain peaks. The children arrived there in the middle of a thousand-year summer. Now the frosts are beginning to come, the leaves are falling, and they realize that winter will eventually freeze over the land." She paused and then added, "That's about as much as I can get out of them."

Someone cried, "That still don't explain why *here*, in Hamelin, Nebraska. Why don't they go back to the old town, in Germany? It's them they want, not us. We never saw no Piper — we ain't done wrong."

Doc said, "Don't bet on it," and puffed hard on his pipe.

The lawyer studied the nearest child. Its skin was like obsidian, yet the child itself, a girl, looked vulnerable. *If you picked her up and dropped her*, he thought, *she would smash like porcelain*. He caught her staring back at him, with eyes of lapis lazuli, and he looked away quickly, embarrassed because she was around thirteen years of age, a girl, and nude. He felt as though he had been caught peeking into someone's bedroom through a crack in the curtains.

When he looked back at her, she had turned away slightly, as if trying to distance herself from him. Once again, looking at the skin over her smooth shoulders, her buttocks, she reminded him of things from the earth: marble, quartz, malachite. Her fingernails shone as if polished by wind-blown dust. Even the highlights on her cheeks were the deep red of garnet, not of apples or anything that had once had life. There was no bloom on her, no natural softness anywhere.

"Doc's right," said David Werner, "I'll tell you what it is. This town. These children are taking their revenge on the adults of Hamelin for stealing their childhood from them, for allowing the Piper to take them from their homes and families. Hate has replaced the love that was in their hearts when they were young."

Dan said, "But this *ain't* Hamelin — not *their* Hamelin."

"No, it's not," said the lawyer, "but they found their way here to the descendants of their parents. The original Hamelin is a big thriving town now — with a much larger population than it had in the fourteenth century. Hamelin, Nebraska, now that's about the right size, the right population. And there's this stink of guilt in the air — something to do with betrayal — something to do with sending children away to a place from which they can never return. You understand what I'm saying here? This is not geography, this is *sensing*, this is following an emotion through from some other dimension, somewhere beyond our imaginations. I think these little guys mean to get even with their parents, and since their parents are long gone, they'll settle for us, the adult inhabitants of Hamelin, Nebraska, the people who couldn't give a damn whether kids live or die, so long as they're safe themselves."

"What do you think we ought to do, Dan?" asked another citizen, ignoring the young lawyer.

The deputy replied, "Hold 'em here. They got more friends out there, that's for sure. We'll get 'em all in one night, when they come for these gremlins."

"I don't think that's a good idea, Dan," remarked David Werner. "Call in the state police. Let them deal with it. This is getting out of hand."

Dan Starkly shook his head emphatically.

"Hamelin settles its own troubles. Anybody tries somethin' tonight, they get what's coming to them. People have been killed here. The mayor, the sheriff. When I get all the perpetrators in custody, then I might think about callin' in some help. I want those little guys to myself for a while."

There was no changing the deputy's mind, even when Doc got behind the lawyer and supported his advice. While they were arguing one of the creatures made a run for the door, would have made it to the outside, when a nervous farmer let loose with his twelve-gauge, deafening everyone in the room. The heavy shot took away the back of a rattan chair and almost cut the child in half.

Doc Skimmer walked over and inspected the body.

"Hell," said Doc. "Nothin' I can do for this little fellah, that's for sure."

David Werner crossed the room and stared down on the corpse. It had not shattered into a thousand pieces. It was not china or glass: it was flesh and blood. There was a boy-child on the floor, and it was dead. He was dead. Looking back sharply at the other children, David thought he detected smiles on their marble features. Not smiles of satisfaction, but knowing smiles that said *you'll pay for that soon enough*. A chill went through the lawyer during this observation. These strange kids had a secret which they hadn't divulged, weren't about to either.

He shook his head, slowly, and then turned to Dan Starkly.

"I think we've dug ourselves a pit here. They're going to come for us now — the rest of them."

"Shit," said Dan, "they're only children."

David Werner nodded, a darkness coming to his eyes.

"Yeah. Only children."

They waited out the night, nervously, sitting in natural groups — the farmers here, the businessmen there, the professionals in a corner away from everyone else — until the dawn began to creep through the cracks in the shutters. Occasionally one of the lost children would stir and adult heads would turn, stare anxiously, until the rustling ceased.

Along with the crowing of a lonely rooster came another sound from outside. Distant it seemed. A high-pitched noise that was painful on the ears, though you couldn't call it loud.

"What the hell's *that*?" asked Dan Starkly, as if this were the last straw.

"I'll go and look," answered David Werner, who made his way to the spiral staircase that led to the top of the clocktower.

He took the wooden steps three at a time.

Once at the top he stared out, into the dim light.

He could see the lost children coming, a long line across the landscape, roughly in the shape of a crescent, but what held his attention more was the ground before them, around them, behind them. It seemed to be moving, the whole surface of the earth, rippling towards the edge of town. David Werner leaned out over the rail of the balcony, trying to penetrate the gloom with his eyes. Then he drew back sharply with a swift intake of breath.

Suddenly, he knew what it was.

"Shit. Forgot about them."

The smell of tobacco smoke hit his nostrils. Doc was behind him, puffing away on his weed. David Werner pointed to the waves approaching Hamelin as a grey tide slides over a wide, gradually-sloping beach.

"What is it?" asked Doc, straining his elderly eyes to see what the young lawyer was trying to show him.

"*The first shall be last*," quoted David Werner. "What else did the Piper take with him into his hidden land? Before he took the children?"

Doc's jaw dropped.

"The rats," he finally replied.

"Right. The rats. And here they come. Millions of them. Like the children, I guess they have the gift of longevity — I guess very few of them have died. Unlike the children, though, they've been breeding all this time. Rats do that, pretty efficiently I understand. There's probably close on a billion rats out there, heading towards us."

"Can we run?" asked the doctor.

The lawyer shook his head.

"We'd never make it."

There was nothing to say after that. The two men descended to the hall below.

"They're coming," said David Werner to the citizens of Hamelin, Nebraska. "Anybody brought any explosives with them?"

A farmer coughed.

"Got a couple of sticks of dynamite," he replied. "In my truck out back. Gonna blow out a stump on my way home."

"Right, you take the women and kids. Run for the ravine. Run like hell. When you're over the bridge, blow it behind you. Quick now. You may stand a chance, I don't know. It depends on how long we can hold them, keep them busy."

"What's this?" asked Dan, but Doc waved him quiet. The farmer left with the women and all the children under fifteen years of age.

"Now we'd better get to the windows," said David Werner. "Those with scatterguns take the best positions."

"How many of 'em?" asked Dan, and Doc just gave him a mirthless grin.

"You got a spare handgun, boy?" said the elderly practitioner. "Give it to me."

"Sure," replied the deputy, pulling a Colt from his waistband. "Didn't know you was a gun man, Doc."

"I'm not. Couldn't hit a barn door holding the handle. This is for me. When they get inside, I'm taking the easy way out."

Dan Starkly gaped, his lack of understanding evident in his expression.

He said, "Just kids ..."

"Not any more," replied David Werner.

The young lawyer crossed to the window and stared outside. He did not speak for a long time, but when he did, it was with a low voice, the tone of a man who has given up hope.

"I think I've been right in my assessment of the situation," he said. "I'm sure I have. Those of you who want to see what we're up against, come over here and look. Scream if you want to. It won't make any difference."

Then he took an automatic out of his pocket and simply pointed into the thick mass of scrambling bodies coming through the picket fence, firing rapidly, one random shot after the other, hitting something every time.

A few seconds later the enemy began pouring through the

Assassin

(Continued from page 5)

the whirlpool, there's nothing but a grey fog of generic buildings; out there, structures are still moving as one — or near enough to remain standing — but I'm shifting so much faster than they are that the skyline has smeared into an amorphous multiple-exposure of a billion different possibilities.

A human figure, sliced open obliquely from skull to groin, materializes in front of me, topples, then vanishes. My guts squirm, but I press on. I know that the very same thing must be happening to versions of me — but I declare it, I define it, to be the death of strangers. The gradient is so high now that different parts of the body can be dragged into different worlds, where the complementary pieces of anatomy have no good statistical reason to be correctly aligned. The rate at which this fatal dissociation occurs, though, is inexplicably lower than calculations predict; the human body somehow defends its integrity, and shifts as a whole far more often than it should. The physical basis for this anomaly has yet to be pinned down — but then, the physical basis for the human brain creating the delusion of a unique history, a sense of time, and a sense of identity from the multifurcating branches and fans of superspace has also proven to be elusive.

The sky grows light, a weird blue-grey that no single overcast sky ever possessed. The streets themselves are in a state of flux now; every second or third step is a revelation — bitumen, broken masonry, concrete, sand, all at slightly different levels — and briefly, a patch of withered grass. An inertial navigation implant in my skull guides me through the chaos. Clouds of dust and smoke come and go, and then —

A cluster of apartment blocks, with surface features flickering, but showing no signs of disintegrating. The rates of shift here are higher than ever, but there's a counterbalancing effect: the worlds between which the flow runs are required to be more and more alike, the closer you get to the dreamer.

The group of buildings is roughly symmetrical, and it's perfectly clear which one lies at the centre. None of me would fail to make the same judgment, so I won't need to go through absurd mental contortions to avoid acting on the tip-off.

The front entrance to the building oscillates, mainly between three alternatives. I choose the leftmost door, a matter of procedure, a standard which The Company managed to propagate between itself before I was even recruited. (No doubt contradictory instructions circulated for a while, but one scheme must have dominated, eventually, because I've never been briefed any differently.) I often wish I could leave (and/or follow) a trail of some kind, but any mark I made would be useless, swept downstream faster than those it was meant to guide. I have no choice but to trust in procedure to minimize my dispersion.

From the foyer, I can see four stairwells — all with stairs converted into piles of flickering rubble. I step into the leftmost, and glance up; the early-morning light floods in through a variety of possible windows. The spacing between the great concrete slabs of the floors is holding constant; the energy difference between such large structures in different positions lends them more stability than all the possible, specific shapes of flights of stairs. Cracks must be developing, though, and given time, there's no doubt that even this building would succumb to its discrepancies — killing the dreamer, in world after world, and putting an end to the flow. But who knows how far the whirlpool might have spread by

then?

The explosive devices I carry are small, but more than adequate. I set one down in the stairwell, speak the arming sequence, and run. I glance back across the foyer as I retreat, but, at a distance, the details among the rubble are nothing but a blur. The bomb I've planted has been swept into another world, but it's a matter of faith — and experience — that there's an infinite line of others to take its place.

I collide with a wall where there used to be a door, step back, try again, pass through. Sprinting across the road, I skirt around an abandoned car that materializes in front of me; drop behind it, cover my head.

Eighteen. Nineteen. Twenty. Twenty-one. Twenty-two?

Not a sound. I look up. The car has vanished. The building still stands — and still flickers.

I climb to my feet, dazed. Some bombs may have — must have — failed ... but enough should have exploded to disrupt the flow.

So what's happened? Perhaps the dreamer has survived in some small, but contiguous, part of the flow, and it's closed off into a loop — which it's my bad luck to be a part of. *Survived how?* The worlds in which the bomb exploded should have been spread randomly, uniformly, everywhere dense enough to do the job ... but perhaps some freak clustering effect has given rise to a gap.

Or maybe I've ended up squeezed out of part of the flow. The theoretical conditions for that have always struck me as far too bizarre to be fulfilled in real life ... but what if it has happened? A gap in my presence, downstream from me, would have left a set of worlds with no bomb planted at all — which then flowed along and caught up with me, once I moved away from the building and my shift rate dropped.

I "return" to the stairwell. There's no unexploded bomb, no sign that any version of me has been here. I plant the backup device and run. This time, I find no shelter on the street, and I simply hit the ground.

Again, nothing.

I struggle to calm myself, to visualize the possibilities. If the gap without bombs hadn't fully passed the gap without me when the first bombs went off, then I'd still have been missing from a part of the surviving flow — allowing exactly the same thing to happen all over again.

I stare at the intact building, disbelieving. *I am the ones who succeed. That's all that defines me.* But who, exactly, failed? If I was absent from part of the flow, there were no versions of me in those worlds to fail. Who takes the blame? Whom do I disown? Those who successfully planted the bomb, but "should have" done it in other worlds? *Am I among them?* I have no way of knowing.

So, what now? How big is the gap? How close am I to it? How many times can it defeat me?

I have to keep killing the dreamer until I succeed.

I return to the stairwell. The floors are about three metres apart. To ascend, I use a small grappling hook on a short rope; the hook fires an explosive-driven spike into the concrete floor. Once the rope is uncoiled, its chances of ending up in separate pieces in different worlds is magnified; it's essential to move quickly.

I search the first storey systematically, following procedure to the letter, as if I'd never heard of Room 522. A blur of alternative dividing walls, ghostly spartan furniture, transient heaps of sad possessions. When I've finished, I pause until the clock in my skull reaches the next multiple of ten minutes. It's an imperfect strategy — some stragglers will fall more than ten minutes behind — but that would be true however long I waited.

The second storey is deserted, too. But a little more stable; there's no doubt that I'm drawing closer to the heart of the whirlpool.

The third storey's architecture is almost solid. The fourth,

if not for the abandoned ephemera flickering in the corners of rooms, could pass for normal.

The fifth —

I kick the doors open, one by one, moving steadily down the corridor. 502. 504. 506. I thought I might be tempted to break ranks when I came this close, but instead I find it easier than ever to go through the motions, knowing that I'll have no opportunity to regroup. 516. 518. 520.

At the far end of Room 522, there's a young woman stretched out on a bed. Her hair is a diaphanous halo of possibilities, her clothing a translucent haze, but her body looks solid and permanent, the almost-fixed point about which all the night's chaos has spun.

I step into the room, take aim at her skull, and fire. The bullet shifts worlds before it can reach her, but it will kill another version, downstream. I fire again and again, waiting for a bullet from a brother assassin to strike home before my eyes — or for the flow to stop, for the living dreamers to become too few, too sparse, to maintain it.

Neither happens.

"You took your time."

I swing around. The blue-haired woman stands outside the doorway. I reload the gun; she makes no move to stop me. My hands are shaking. I turn back to the dreamer and kill her, another two dozen times. The version before me remains untouched, the flow undiminished.

I reload again, and wave the gun at the blue-haired woman. "What the fuck have you done to me? *Am I alone?* Have you slaughtered all the others?" But that's absurd — and if it were true, how could she see me? I'd be a momentary, imperceptible flicker to each separate version of her, nothing more; she wouldn't even know I was here.

She shakes her head, and says mildly, "We've slaughtered no one. We've mapped you into Cantor dust, that's all. Every one of you is still alive — but none of you can stop the whirlpool."

Cantor dust. A fractal set, uncountably infinite, but with measure zero. There's not one gap in my presence; there's an infinite number, an endless series of ever smaller holes, everywhere. But —

"How? You set me up, you kept me talking, but how could you coordinate the delays? And calculate the effects? It would take ..."

"Infinite computational power? An infinite number of people?" She smiles faintly. "I am an infinite number of people. All sleepwalking on S. All dreaming each other. We can act together, in synch, as one — or we can act independently. Or something in between, as now: the versions of me who can see and hear you at any moment are sharing their sense data with the rest of me."

I turn back to the dreamer. "Why defend her? She'll never get what she wants. She's tearing the city apart, and she'll never even reach her destination."

"Not here, perhaps."

"Not here? She's crossing all the worlds she lives in! Where else is there?"

The woman shakes her head. "What creates those worlds? Alternative possibilities for ordinary physical processes. But it doesn't stop there; the possibility of motion between worlds has exactly the same effect. Superspace itself branches out into different versions, versions containing all possible cross-world flows. And there can be higher-level flows, between those versions of superspace, so the whole structure branches again. And so on."

I close my eyes, drowning in vertigo. If this endless ascent into greater infinities is true —

"Somewhere, the dreamer always triumphs? Whatever I do?"

"Yes."

"And somewhere, I always win? Somewhere, you've failed to defeat me?"

"Yes."

Who am I? I'm the ones who succeed. Then who am I? I'm nothing at all. A set of measure zero.

I drop the gun and take three steps towards the dreamer. My clothes, already tattered, part worlds and fall away.

I take another step, and then halt, shocked by a sudden warmth. My hair and outer layers of skin have vanished; I'm covered in a fine sweat of blood. I notice, for the first time, the frozen smile on the dreamer's face.

And I wonder: in how many infinite sets of worlds will I take one more step? And how many countless versions of me will turn around instead, and walk out of this room? *Who exactly am I saving from shame, when I'll live and die in every possible way?*

Myself.

□

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Gene Wars

By Paul J. McAuley

1.

On Evan's eighth birthday, his aunt sent him the latest smash-hit booklet, *Splicing Your Own Sentiments*. The box-lid depicted an alien swamp throbbing with weird, amorphous life, a double helix spiralling out of a test-tube was embossed in one corner. Don't let your father see that, his mother said, so Evan took it out to the old barn, set up the plastic culture trays and vials of chemicals and retroviruses on a dusty workbench in the shadow of the shrouded combine.

His father found Evan there two days later. The slime mould he'd created, a million amoebae aggregated around a drop of cyclic AMP, had been transformed with a retrovirus and was budding little blue-furred blobs. Evan's father dumped culture trays and vials in the yard and made Evan pour a litre of industrial-grade bleach over them. More than fear or anger, it was the acrid stench that made Evan cry.

That summer, the leasing company foreclosed on the livestock. The rep who supervised repossession of the supercows drove off in a big car with the test-tube and double-helix logo on its gull-wing door. The next year the wheat failed, blighted by a particularly virulent rust. Evan's father couldn't afford the new resistant strain, and the farm went under.

2.

Evan lived with his aunt, in the capital. He was fifteen. He had a street bike, a plug-in computer, and a pet microsauro, a cat-sized triceratops in purple funfur. Buying the special porridge which was all the microsauro could eat took half of Evan's weekly allowance; that was why he let his best friend inject the pet with a bootleg virus to edit out its dietary dependence. It was only a partial success: the triceratops no longer needed its porridge, but it developed epilepsy triggered by sunlight. Evan had to keep it in his wardrobe. When it started shedding fur in great swathes, he abandoned it in a nearby park. Microsaurs were out of fashion, anyway. Dozens could be found wandering the park, nibbling at leaves, grass, discarded scraps of fastfood. Quite soon they disappeared, starved to extinction.

3.

The day before Evan graduated, his sponsor firm called to tell him that he wouldn't be doing research after all. There had been a change of policy: the covert gene wars were going public. When Evan started to protest, the woman said sharply, "You're better off than many long-term employees. With a degree in molecular genetics you'll make sergeant at least."

4.

The jungle was a vivid green blanket in which rivers made silvery forked lightnings. Warm wind rushed around Evan as he leaned out the helicopter's hatch; harness dug into his shoulders. He was twenty-three, a tech sergeant. It was his second tour of duty.

His goggles flashed icons over the view, tracking the target. Two villages a klick apart, linked by a red dirt road narrow as a capillary that suddenly widened to an artery as the helicopter dove.

Flashes on the ground: Evan hoped the peasants only had Kalashnikovs: last week some gook had downed a copter with an antiquated SAM. Then he was too busy laying the pattern, virus-suspension in a sticky spray that fogged the maize fields.

Afterwards, the pilot, an old-timer, said over the intercom,

"Things get tougher every day. We used just to take a leaf, cloning it, the rest. You couldn't even call it theft. And this stuff ... I always thought war was bad for business."

Evan said, "The company owns copyright to the maize genome. Those peasants aren't licensed to grow it."

The pilot said admiringly, "Man, you're a real company guy. I bet you don't even know what country this is."

Evan thought about that. He said, "Since when were countries important?"

5.

Rice fields spread across the floodplain, dense as a handstitched quilt. In every paddy, peasants bent over their own reflections, planting seedlings for the winter crop.

In the centre of the UNESCO delegation, the Minister for Agriculture stood under a black umbrella held by an aide. He was explaining that his country was starving to death after a record rice crop.

Evan was at the back of the little crowd, bareheaded in warm drizzle. He wore a smart one-piece suit, yellow over-shoes. He was twenty-eight, had spent two years infiltrating UNESCO for his company.

The minister was saying, "We have to buy seed genespliced for pesticide resistance to compete with our neighbours, but my people can't afford to buy the rice they grow. It must all be exported to service our debt. Our children are starving in the midst of plenty."

Evan stifled a yawn. Later, at a reception in some crumbling embassy, he managed to get the minister on his own. The man was drunk, unaccustomed to hard liquor. Evan told him he was very moved by what he had seen.

"Look in our cities," the minister said, slurring his words. "Every day a thousand more refugees pour in from the countryside. There is kwashiorkor, beri-beri."

Evan popped a canapé into his mouth. One of his company's new lines, it acquired with delicious lasciviousness before he swallowed it. "I may be able to help you," he said. "The people I represent have a new yeast that completely fulfills dietary requirements and will grow on a simple medium."

"How simple?" As Evan explained, the minister, no longer as drunk as he had seemed, steered him onto the terrace. The minister said, "You understand this must be confidential. Under UNESCO rules ..."

"There are ways around that. We have lease arrangements with five countries that have ... trade imbalances similar to your own. We lease the genome as a loss-leader, to support governments who look favourably on our other products ..."

6.

The gene pirate was showing Evan his editing facility when the slow poison finally hit him. They were aboard an ancient ICBM submarine grounded somewhere off the Philippines. Missile tubes had been converted into fermenters. The bridge was crammed with the latest manipulation technology, virtual reality gear which let the wearer directly control molecule-sized cutting robots as they travelled along DNA helices.

"It's not facilities I need," the pirate told Evan, "it's distribution."

"No problem," Evan said. The pirate's security had been pathetically easy to penetrate. He'd tried to infect Evan with



a zombie virus, but Evan's gene-spliced designer immune system had easily dealt with it. Slow poison was so much more subtle by the time it could be detected it was too late. Evan was thirty-two. He was posing as a Swiss grey-market broker.

"This is where I keep my old stuff," the pirate said, rapping a stainless-steel cryogenic vat. "Stuff from before I went big time. A free luciferase gene complex, for instance. Remember when the Brazilian rainforest started to glow? That was me." He dashed sweat from his forehead, frowned at the room's complicated thermostat. Grossly fat and completely hairless, he wore nothing but Bermuda shorts and shower sandals. He'd been targeted because he was about to break the big time with a novel HIV cure. The company was still making a lot of money from its own cure: they made sure AIDS had never been completely eradicated in third-world countries.

Evan said, "I remember the Brazilian government was overthrown — the population took it as a bad omen."

"Hey, what can I say? I was only a kid. Transforming the gene was easy, only difficulty was finding a vector. Old stuff. Somatic mutation really is going to be the next big thing, believe me. Why breed new strains when you can rework a genome cell by cell?" He rapped the thermostat. His hands were shaking. "Hey, is it hot in here, or what?"

"That's the first symptom," Evan said. He stepped out of the way as the gene pirate crashed to the decking. "And that's the second."

The company had taken the precaution of buying the pirate's security chief: Evan had plenty of time to fix the fermenters. By the time he was ashore, they would have boiled dry. On impulse, against orders, he took a microgram sample of the HIV cure with him.

7.

The territory between piracy and legitimacy is a minefield," the assassin told Evan. "It's also where paradigm shifts are most likely to occur, and that's where I come in. My company likes stability. Another year and you'd have gone public, and most likely the share issue would have made you a billionaire — a minor player, but still a player. Those cats, no one else has them. The genome was supposed to have been wiped out back in the twenties. Very astute, quitting the grey medical market and going for luxury goods." She frowned. "Why am I talking so much?"

"For the same reason you're not going to kill me," Evan said.

"It seems such a silly thing to want to do," the assassin admitted.

Evan smiled. He'd long ago decoded the two-stage virus the gene-pirate had used on him: one a Trojan horse which kept his T lymphocytes busy while the other rewrote loyalty genes companies implanted in their employees. Once again it had proven its worth. He said, "I need someone like you in my organization. And since you spent so long getting close enough to seduce me, perhaps you'd do me the honour of becoming my wife. I'll need one."

"You don't mind being married to a killer?"

"Oh, that. I used to be myself."

8.

Evan saw the market crash coming. Gene wars had winnowed basic foodcrops to soybeans, rice and, despite yeast: tailored ever-mutating diseases had reduced cereals and many other cash crops to nucleotide sequences stored in computer vaults. Three global biotechnology companies held patents on the caloric input of ninety-eight percent of humanity, but they had lost control of the technology. Pressures of the war economy had simplified it to the point where anyone could directly manipulate her own genome, and hence her own body form.

Evan had made a fortune in the fashion industry, selling templates and microscopic self-replicating robots which edited DNA. But he guessed that sooner or later someone

would come up with a direct-photosynthesis system, and his stock-market expert systems were programmed to correlate research in the field. He and his wife sold controlling interest in their company three months before the first green people appeared.

9.

I remember when you knew what a human being was," Evan said sadly. "I suppose I'm old-fashioned, but there it is."

From her cradle, inside a mist of spray, his wife said, "Is that why you never went green? I always thought it was a fashion statement."

"Old habits die hard." The truth was, he liked his body the way it was. These days, going green involved somatic mutation which grew a metre-high black cowl to absorb sufficient light energy. Most people lived in the tropics, swarms of black-caped anarchists. Work was no longer a necessity, but an indulgence. Evan added, "I'm going to miss you."

"Let's face it," his wife said, "we never were in love. But I'll miss you, too." With a flick of her powerful tail she launched her streamlined body into the sea.

10.

Black-cowled post-humans, gliding slowly in the sun, aggregating and reaggregating like amoebae. Dolphinoidea, tentacles sheathed under fins, rocking in tanks of cloudy water. Ambulatory starfish; tumbling bushes of spikes; snakes with a single arm, a single leg; flocks of tiny birds, brilliant as emeralds, each flock a single entity.

People, grown strange, infected with myriads of micro-spic machines which re-engraved their body form at will.

Evan lived in a secluded estate. He was revered as a founding father of the posthuman revolution. A purple funfur microsur followed him everywhere. It was recording him because he had elected to die.

"I don't regret anything," Evan said, "except perhaps not following my wife when she changed. I saw it coming, you know. All this. Once the technology became simple enough, cheap enough, the companies lost control. Like television or computers, but I suppose you don't remember those." He sighed. He had the vague feeling he'd said all this before. He'd had no new thoughts for a century, except the desire to put an end to thought.

The microsur said, "In a way, I suppose I am a computer. Will you see the colonial delegation now?"

"Later," Evan hobbled to a bench and slowly sat down. In the last couple of months he had developed mild arthritis, liver spots on the backs of his hands: death finally expressing parts of his genome that had been suppressed for so long. Hot sunlight fell through the velvet streamers of the tree things; Evan dozed, woke to find a group of starfish watching him. They had blue, human eyes, one at the tip of each muscular arm.

"They wish to honour you by taking your genome to Mars," the little purple triceratops said.

Evan sighed. "I just want peace. To rest. To die."

"Oh, Evan," the little triceratops said patiently, "surely even you know that nothing really dies any more." □

Next issue

With the next issue of *Aboriginal*, we will return to our all-American fare with stories by previous contributors Phillip C. Jennings, Ann K. Schwader and Paul A. Gilster, along with offerings by writers new to *Aboriginal* including: Nina Kiriki Hoffman, Gail Regier, Chuck Rothman, and A.J. Austin. Contributing artists will include Courtney Skinner, Lori Deitrick, Charles Lang, and Larry Blamire, who has illustrated four of the issue's seven stories.

We'll also welcome back our usual columnists. Enjoy.

Letters to *Interzone*

Interaction

(In place of our usual letter column, the following brief comments have been extracted from *Interzone's* annual reader-survey returns — Editor Pringle.)

"There's very little I don't like! Monthly publication seems to have allowed greater variety of style and length of stories, which I greatly approve. Variety is the spice of life and, so far as I'm concerned, is what it is all about. Please keep up the good work" — Lannah Battley, Towcester, Northamptonshire.

"In general, I think the quality has dropped a bit since you went monthly. There also seems to be more non-fiction now — perhaps because you need to fill out space more?" — Rob Butler, Reading, Berkshire.

(Editor Pringle: Wrong on the last point — the quantity of fiction we used to publish in *Interzone* in the early days averaged 30,000 words; then it went up to 35,000 words about the time we went bimonthly; and now it's nudging 40,000 words most issues.)

"Ian Miller has produced many original and breathtaking images over many years now, and his cover and illustrations for issue 34, together with his cover for issue 40 and illustrations to Egan's story in issue 41, were easily the best I have seen in *Interzone*. Their contrast, detail and technique are ideally suited to black and white reproduction, and their serious and often bizarre nature always lift the appearance of any story" — Michael Reilly, Salisbury East, Australia.

"Who are the authors who have made the most significant contributions to the development of *Interzone*? For the record, my list of favourite influences on the evolution of the beast are: Eric Brown — for providing the brain; Geoff Ryman — for providing the heart; Kim Newman — for locating the funny bone; and Ian Watson — for revealing those obscure little crevices which, upon deep probing, invariably provide something which is totally unexpected and usually quite repulsive" — Howard Smith, Market Rasen, Lincolnshire.

"Overall, Greg Egan was my *Interzone* author of the year. Three out of three worthy stories, with both 'Learning to Be Me' and 'Axiomatic' vying with Ian Lee's 'A Lot of Mackerel', A Lot of Satellites' and Neil Ferguson's 'One-Way to Wap Wap' as my favourite *IZ* stories of the year" — Rob Letters to *Interzone*

Freeth, Altrincham, Cheshire.

"Brian Aldiss's 'A Life of Matter and Death' (issue 38) was the story of the year. *IZ* has published two stories which you could call 'perfect', in the sense that they combine flight of the imagination with extreme literary excellence, without feeling too pretentious: Geoff Ryman's 'The Unconquered Country' (issue 7) and this one" — Paul Western, Winchester.

"Hello from a loyal US reader (since issue 12). *IZ* is one of the few publications of any sort I really read from cover to cover and await with anticipation. Head and shoulders above your rivals and all the fat-cats" — Henry Wessells, New York.

"I've just been re-reading some of your early issues — goodness knows how you lasted so long! Now, though, *IZ* is, to my mind, the best of magazine around. Even the big names are improving, but it's the new names who give the magazine real strength" — T. J. Mason, Halifax.

"Being a new reader, I must tell you of the initial thoughts I had about *Interzone*. The first was that it was very 'wordy' — i.e. large sections of text with very few illustrations or even adverts to break up the flow. This initially put me off buying the magazine, but once I started to read it I found that I was getting to like it. It was quite a change from *Fear*, the other magazine that I read" — Gregory Lavery, Craigavon, N. Ireland.

"For me, 'Heads' by Greg Bear was the best, and 'Suburban Industrial' by Glenn Grant was the worst story in issues 33 to 42. I've been a bit sceptical about *IZ* going monthly the last year, but I have to admit that there was no reason for that. I think only two or three stories wouldn't or shouldn't have been published since issue 35" — Christian A. Mathioschek, Duisburg, Germany.

"On the whole, the quality and (now you've gone monthly) the quantity of fiction in *IZ* is increasing all the time. For the 'best fiction' question I was sorely tempted to say 'all the stories published'. This is the first full year of *IZ* I've had to vote on (it's heart-rending to think about the years of fiction that I've missed) and it won't be the last as I fully intend to renew my subscription" — Gerald Griffith, Leicester.

"The venerable Mr. Clute deserves a mention; he is symptomatic of all the cleverness and obfuscation which is damaging to modern criticism and ul-

timately to literature. But you can't dislike a man (or his methods) when he comes up with a gem like the 'dime a doynene' gag in his review of Storm Constantine's *The Monstrous Regiment* in issue 36" — M. Bould, Plymouth, Devon.

(Editor Pringle: To your reference in context for other readers, what John Clute wrote was this: "Bad anti-feminist female fantasy novels cross-dressing as sf — with rocket ships stuck like falsies to their heaving bosoms — must be a dime a doynene.")

"I was beginning to lose faith in the fiction until the All-Female issue, number 42, which I think is one of the best *Interzones* ever. On its showing, maybe you should exercise positive discrimination! My favourite story of all is, I suspect, not a particularly popular choice: 'The Eradication of Romantic Love' by Pat Murphy. It's just such a simple idea, brilliantly written up. I also particularly liked 'The Angel of Goliah' by Gibson and Sterling, though I hadn't expected to" — Andrew Ferguson, Glenrothes, Fife.

"This may come across as male chauvinist piggy, but I found the December 1990 issue (number 42) to be the most dissatisfying *IZ* ever. In retrospect, I realize that the main problem was the lack of recognizable signposts in the magazine. After a quick initial browse I usually read the John Clute reviews, Charles Platt's column (when it's there) and, unless there's a particularly tempting piece of fiction, Nick Lowe's film column (this has become increasingly rewarding to read and is worth reading early). All of these items were of course missing; their replacements didn't give me equivalent pleasure. In addition I found the fiction to be generally gray and dull. What was particularly disappointing when I checked the authors' credits was the fact that all the fiction items except one were from North American authors. I think, if you are going to continue with 'ghetto' editions you would be wise to consider an 'America-free' issue" — John S. Thornley, Ashford, Kent.

(Editor Pringle: actually, two of the stories in issue 42 were by British-based authors, Gwyneth Jones and Lisa Tuttle (although it is true that the latter is American by birth). This reflects the sad fact that there are very few competent women writers of sf and fantasy in Britain. We are not planning any more 'all-female' issues (the reaction to issue 42 was extremely mixed) but if we were it's highly likely that they too would contain a high proportion of stories by American writers.) □

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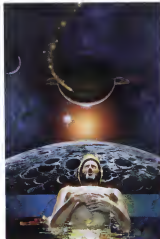
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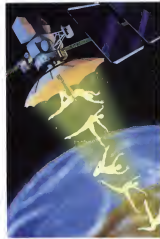
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The Aboriginal Art Gallery

The *Aboriginal Art Gallery* is your chance to obtain a glossy print of one or more illustrations used for our early cover art before the magazine was printed on glossy paper. The prints are as crisp and as sharp as the original artwork and have a clarity we could not reproduce in issues 1 to 7 on a cold web.

These prints are big. Most of them are 11 by 14 inches and will be mailed rolled in a tube. The cost is \$15 for each **un-mounted** print, plus \$3 postage and handling.

To order one or more prints, send your check to: The Aboriginal Art Gallery
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